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Barbara Heathcotes trial

by

Rosa Nouchette Carey

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BARBARA HEATHCOTE'S TRIAL.

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CHAPTER I.

BE FAITHFUL, BARBARA.

"Beshrew me, but I love her heartily;
For she is wise, if I can judge of her;
And fair she is, if that mine eyes be true;
And true she is, as she hath proved herself;
And therefore like herself, wise, fair, and true,
She shall be placed in my constant soul."—*Shakspeare.*

So time went on merrily at Heathcote House, and presently Nigel Strath took his departure.

And he left them as suddenly as he had arrived. One morning he came down a little earlier than was his wont, and quietly announced his intention of returning to St. Ronans that same day. "I find my mother wants me," was all the excuse he volunteered; and then he went on with his breakfast.

And if Susan had dished up a thunderbolt, the little party could hardly have been more surprised. The

doctor opened his eyes wide, Hester made a little speech, and Connie was loud in her lamentations; only Barbara was silent.

"We shall miss you dreadfully," Hester was saying. St. Ronans bowed, and Barbara drank down her coffee with a gulp.

"I suppose you will be going to the village by-and-by, doctor?"

"In about half an hour,—perhaps less," said Dr. Heathcote, looking at his watch.

"In half an hour; then I think I will walk with you, and Stevens can follow with my traps. If there be anything that I hate," continued the young philosopher, "it is a fuss of leave-taking, or a fuss of welcome. My mother, though superior to her sex in most things, is not exempt from this little failing. The house would not contain the length and breadth of her preparations. I am not quite sure that she would not consider it her duty to roast an ox whole, as a sort of thank-offering for my special deliverance and safe return. Mothers are only human, doctor, so I told her nothing about it."

"But how about the little sister? She will come in presently, and find you gone."

"Oh, Nest! she's nobody: besides, she is in the secret. Nest's fuss is of the quiet sort, and not quite unbearable."

Dr. Heathcote shrugged his shoulders. He thought

this the strangest young man he had ever set eyes on; but it was not for him to say anything; so he changed the subject skilfully, and Nigel responding with an air of relief, they were by-and-by fencing in their old way on political subjects, on which the doctor always proved to himself, and everybody else, that he was in the right, while Nigel, just for argument's sake, and breathless as one who scents the battle, invariably defended a false position step by step, covering himself with a shield of words, and provoking his enemy to advance, till, just in the hottest of the skirmish, he would throw up the whole with a careless, "That will do, doctor; I was quite of your opinion from the first," and then begin some laughing argument with Barbara, leaving his opponent exhausted with needless argument, and thoroughly discomfited with his mock victory.

They were having a real skirmish this morning, for Nigel was in no jesting mood; Leigh was on his father's side, and there was quite a war of words. Another time Barbara would have rushed in between them, and made the confusion worse by rallying the weakest party; but though they were belaboring and cudgelling her favourite statesman between them, and knocking down her pet opinions like ninepins, nothing could disturb her gravity or provoke her to open her lips: she only sat plaiting the table-cloth into fretful little folds that matched exactly the frowning lines on

her forehead. Was Barbara cross? Not that that was anything new; but she was fuming now with a positive chafe and pain: it was not too much to say that she was hurt and disappointed beyond endurance. St. Ronans was a failure, then. All men were failures, she thought, as she pushed back her chair and walked to the window, which piece of independent action broke up the party.

"Time 's up!" said Dr. Heathcote. "I shall be ready in ten minutes."

"All right, doctor," answered Nigel, lazily; and then he put his hands in his pockets, after Leigh's fashion, and lounged up to Barbara's window.

But Bab never looked at him: she only gave a toss to the tassel of the blind, and seemed intent on catching it again. Nigel stood quietly by, and watched her. The childishness of the proceeding seemed to amuse him. Then he waxed impatient, and jerked it out of her reach, with a slight laugh; but Bab took no notice: she only drummed idly on the window-sill, and hummed an air, with the sulkiest face imaginable. Nigel leaned towards her with a frank smile. "Well, there must be an end to everything, I suppose. So good-bye, Barbara."

"Good-bye," said Barbara, coldly; but she never left off drumming.

A queer, inexplicable look came over Nigel's face, and then he took back his hand without a word.

"Good-bye," said Barbara, this time with manifest effort. "Daddy will be waiting for you." And then she took up her humming again without the slightest hesitation. There was no mistaking her mood; but if she could only have seen the scrutiny that read the meaning of every movement! But Bab never looked at anyone when she was displeased: it would have brought her too soon to reason.

"What makes you in such a bad humor this morning?" thus quietly asked Bab's master.

The suddenness of the question made her crimson in a moment; but it unsealed her lips. "I am not in a bad humor," she answered; "but I am disappointed in you," and then her eyes filled with tears. Barbara, as usual, spoke the truth from her heart. It was very childish and very undignified of her, without doubt; but who ever did couple Bab and dignity together? And there was genuine pathos in her voice, and genuine tears in her eyes. She was hurt; there was no denying that. The suddenness of the leave-taking, the quick break-up of pleasant lessons, distressed her beyond measure. She thought him ungrateful; and ingratitude was a great sin in Bab's eyes. "Good-bye," she said, again. "You have only disappointed me,—that is all; but all men are alike."

"And all women, too. What faithless creatures you are!—you especially, Barbara." There was no

mistaking the kindness of his tone now. Bab looked up quickly, and his smile was pleasant to her.

"I do not understand," she faltered: "it seems all so strange, and sudden, and unkind."

"You do not understand?" he continued, a little loftily; "but then you are only a woman, and you do not know the manner of man you are dealing with. I shall not disappoint you, Barbara; neither am I ungrateful or unkind, or any of the hard things you have been thinking me the last half-hour. Call me nothing, please, till I give you leave: at present I am only Bab's master."

His speech bewildered her; she felt it enigmatical: but then there was no doubting his kindness. She hung her head, already abashed at her petulance.

"I can't give you your lesson to-day," he said quietly; "you can work up by yourself, or not, as you please. To-morrow I shall be ready for you as usual."

Such an astonished look Barbara gave him.

"To-morrow; but where?"

"In my studio, of course," he replied, with an amused look at her surprise. "Don't be alarmed," he continued, mischievously; "Nest will be there to play propriety. I have arranged it all with my mother, and the doctor approves;" and this prudential speech to Bab, who cared nothing for proprieties and decorum as the world understands them. "There's the doctor calling me.

Adieu! au revoir, Barbarina mia. I am sorry you are disappointed in me." Such a wicked little smile on his face as he spoke. Barbara met it with a shame-faced, happy look, but without a word.

But, as soon as he had left the room, she clapped her hands, and broke into a sweet little trill like a bird, and then ran out into the garden and picked a white moss-rose bud off her favorite tree; and when St. Ronans came out with her father, after laughing adieus with Hester and Connie, she came up shyly and pushed it into his hand, as she had done once before; but she was not prepared for the bright, full smile that understood and thanked her; so in her confusion she shook her hair over her eyes, and went and hid behind some lilac bushes, and would not answer his gaily uttered good-bye, or take any notice of her father's cheery call; only when they were gone, she stole out, and peeped through the gate till they were fairly out of sight, and till Connie's shouting summoned her to fresh surprises and fresh repentances.

She had reproached St. Ronans for his ingratitude and caprice, and he had left such tangible proofs of his sojourn amongst them as a young prince might have done, and strewn in the same careless profusion: in every room lay some gift that might make glad the owner's heart—choice books for Dr. Heathcote, a costly cameo for Hester, a set of mosaic ornaments for Connie, and a picture in Barbara's den, with the

line, "In appreciation of her honest industry, from Bab's master."

Nest, coming in an hour later, found her gloating over her treasure with crimson cheeks and wide-opened eyes. Few were the gifts that came to Barbara's share, and rare in consequence was the pleasure she experienced in them. This was perhaps the first work of art that had ever reached her; and then so exquisitely framed too! and she touched the delicate oaken carving, fine with artistic touches, marvelling over its beauty. Nest put her hands softly on her shoulders, and leaned her cheek against hers, "Do you like it, dear?"

"'Liking' is no word," answered Barbara, with a sort of forced composure in her voice. "If he really did this, he is worthy indeed of being my master;" and Barbara gave a little sigh, half sad, and wholly envious.

"Yes, Nie did this. Is it not beautiful—the idea, I mean? It came to him one day when he was listening to some nuns singing behind the lattice. He never knew why, or what occasioned it; but the whole scene, horrid with darkness as it is, flashed over him. Without exception, it is his best picture."

"Then, why did he give it me?" inquired Barbara, with a flush of surprise.

"You had better ask him. Ah, Nie is always generous. He was asking me what I thought you

would like best, and I said, a picture, especially if it were one of his own; and then he mentioned this Magdalene. I could not help calling out, 'Nie, that is your best; don't give that;' and he answered rather sharply, 'And why not? I shall do as I like,' and ordered it to be put in the Tyrolean frame directly. I was a little surprised, I must own, as I knew how highly he prized the picture and carved frame, but I soon grew ashamed of the feeling; for of course he knows, far better even than we do, that you saved his life."

"Nonsense," said Barbara, rather flurried. She could not tell whether it was pain or pleasure beating at her heart, or a strange mingling of both; and she had told him that she was disappointed in him, and had treated him rudely. Well, she could not understand him at all; and then she applied herself anew to her picture.

It was a singular and striking subject, and was entitled, "The night of the first Good Friday." Picture and subject were alike wrapped in gloom.

In detail, it was the summit of the Mount of Sorrow, after the "World's Wonder" had been taken down and laid in the sepulchre: there, rudely flung aside, was the rough-hewn cross, blood-stained, painfully suggestive; and half lying, half kneeling, her arms cast about it, her lips pressed to the stained wood, the Magdalene, her beauty dimly shadowed forth in the gloom; yet one could trace swelling tears under the

reddened eyelids—eyes strained with horror, and heavy with woe.

"Come, Barbara, I must be going; he told me to hasten back." Barbara rose, and reverently shrouded the picture with misty eyes.

"Tell him nothing—only for yourself. Listen! What sermons fail to teach me, that picture has. I can see it all;" and she shuddered. "There, kiss me, Nest; I want to be alone, and study it a little more."

And she studied it till her eyes were wet with tears, so greatly did it move her; but when she had put it away, and had had a long run in the pine-woods, and a long talk with herself and Ben, a sort of warm summer happiness, as sunny as the day itself, came over her—a feeling of satisfaction and content that she rarely felt.

"I feel very happy," she said, quite out loud to herself, as she sat down in her den. "What shall I do? I think, as I feel so very, very, full of cheerfulness, I had better go down to Oakleigh Cottage and talk to Mrs. Strath; and as first impulses are always the best, I will, I will, I will." And so she dressed herself, singing as the birds do for very glee.

There is one thing that is better than a first impulse, and that is a first duty. As Barbara came down in her white summer dress, with its bright-coloured ribbons, and nodded a cheery good-bye to her sister,

who sat alone in her old place, it never occurred to her that Hester looked pale and a little dull, and that it was rather more weary for her than usual to sit and work alone, after the constant brightness of Nigel's presence; neither did it enter her head that it might have been kinder to stay at home and impart a little of her superabundant cheerfulness to Hester, than to carry its freshness elsewhere. Alas, alas! have we not already too frequently scored up Bab as a faulty little person, abounding, as too many of us do, in small every-day selfishnesses, looking out too far and wide for some great work to do, and so missing that small daily gathering of those humbler flowers, that an old saint has told us grow at the foot of the cross?

Hester's gravity and paleness were things of too common occurrence for Barbara to notice. She had a dim notion that her sister's spirits were often flagging; but that she should stay at home, and impart to her some of her own bright vitality, and so doom herself to a corresponding dulness, was a stretch of benevolence that certainly never came into her mind; and so it was, that Bab missed her place at home, and some portion of its love also; for, save to Leigh, her sweetest smiles were to her own elected friends, and so, by that divinely just law, the measure meted out was in her case meted to her again. Hester looked after her, with wistful eyes. She thought how bright and happy she looked. What a fresh lovesome face

it was when she was in a good humor; and then she wished Connie were not out, for the house lay simmering in a great silence, only broken by clanging doors; heat, sunshine, and emptiness; and she sat with a bitter heartache, remembering how, this day so many years ago, the man whose memory she worshipped had first come to her, and now the hot winds and the burning sun beat down on his neglected headstone, and she sat alone in her father's home an altered and careworn woman. Ah, so altered! and here lay the sum of her regret, so hardened and proud and weary with the years. Ah, could he see her now, would her dead Arthur love her as he did in her fresh sweet youth? and so, with her tired head and tired heart, she wore out the summer afternoon.

Meanwhile Barbara stayed her dancing feet, and wondered what sort of a reception she would get. "Why, it is a whole fortnight since Nest and I spent the evening there, and I have only seen Mrs. Strath since at church." And then she thought of Norman, and hereupon she became grave. Norman had not seemed himself lately, or she had fancied it; she did not know which. He had only dropped in two or three times since his cousin had been with them, and each visit he had seemed preoccupied, absent, or out of spirits. He had not had a word for Barbara since that moonlight evening when he had spoken to her so kindly. He hardly noticed her; and when he did, his

old brusque manner had returned. Barbara had a dim notion that something had offended him; and as this idea returned upon her now with full force, she walked up the trim garden as demurely as a scolded kitten might have done; and so noiseless was her entry, that she stood within the room before Mrs. Strath was aware of her vicinity.

"So you are come at last?" said Mrs. Strath, quietly laying down her work. Her tone was a little cold; but she eyed Barbara tenderly for all that, and there were warm sparkles of welcome in her eyes.

"Yes, I have come at last;" and just as the aforesaid scolded kitten rubs and fondles and purrs away judicial wrath, and licks its wicked little lips the while, so did Bab make a little flurry of demonstration and repentance, soft appealings against anger, warm protests for the future, and dimpling excuses which never got to words. And so it came to pass that she was presently installed on her favorite stool, in her favorite place; and Mrs. Strath's hands were idle, and her face benign; and Bab's words waxed faster and faster, like the chatter of a purling little brook that brims over for very fulness, stammering and chafing in its eagerness against opposing obstacles, and determined to the very last to have its say. Thus the hours, that passed so slowly to Hester, slid away so rapidly to these two, that both started with surprise when Jenny entered with the clatter of tea-things, and

Mrs. Strath, exclaiming at the lateness, bustled about, Bab, as usual, watching her.

"There, everything is ready; may I call Norman?"

"Yes. No, I think you had better not, my dear," returned her friend nervously.

"But why not, Mrs. Strath? He came in long ago, and shut himself up in the pipe-room. The tea will be spoilt, if we leave it any longer."

"Yes, I know; but I think I will send Jenny in with it; or you may take it, Barbara. Norman is very busy, and will not come in this evening."

"Not come in! not come to his tea!" Barbara stood aghast, and then her obstinacy asserted itself. "Oh, nonsense! busy or not, he must come in. He does not know I am here, Mrs. Strath, does he?"

Mrs. Strath evaded the question. "Well, go and see for yourself, my dear: I can do nothing with him. He has told me he wants to finish an article for the 'Lancet' to-night, and that I am to send him a cup of tea. He has one of his old headaches, and it is as hot as it can be in that stuffy little room;" and Mrs. Strath, for once in her life, looked rather put out.

"Well, the world's coming to an end," thought Barbara, "if Mrs. Strath is cross. I'll do what I can," she said aloud, and gave herself a vigorous shake as she went out of the room.

She stood still a moment in the dark, square little hall to collect her forces, as she told herself. There

was still something of the scolded kitten about her now, and she lingered not unwillingly on the threshhold of the bright kitchen, with its shining firelight and gleaming tins, with Jenny's neat figure moving about in the little stone yard outside, amidst glints of sunlight and shadows of waving trees.

There were two other rooms on the ground floor, beside the kitchen and the pleasant parlor where Mrs. Strath sat—a little three-cornered room, shabbily, almost barely, furnished, where they took their meals, and another still more oddly shaped room, where Norman kept his books, and instruments, and other odds and ends of miscellaneous rubbish.

Barbara, in her quaint fashion, had nicknamed this room the pipe-room, which, strange to say, its shape oddly resembled. As Barbara entered it, it seemed just like a tiny passage leading to nowhere, lined on either side by book-shelves, but at the farther angle widening out on one side into roomier space, with a window and a fireplace and more book-shelves, and just large enough to hold a study-table and two or three chairs; and as it did, in some measure, resemble the bowl of a pipe in its form, it fully justified Barbara's ridiculous appellation of "the old brown pipe-room." Old and brown it might be; but it looked cosy enough this afternoon, with its open window almost framed with Virginia creeper, and looking out on a bed of scarlet geranium and sweet perfumy mig-

nonette. And Norman did not look so amiss as he sat in the neat little parlor, though his chair would jerk back on the book-shelves; and he looked as though he would touch the ceiling when he stood up.

Barbara peeped round, and took it all in before she made good her entry; and then she drew near on tip-toe, and stood silently beside him, waiting till his noisy quill scratched itself dry.

There, it was empty now; but no,—he dipped it afresh into the battered inkstand, and it was scratching and squeaking over the paper again, spluttering out its inky tail;—how Barbara hated quills! and Norman, with his hot face, worked on, squaring his great shoulders and wrinkling his forehead till his eyebrows were lost in his hair, while Barbara played a noiseless tune on his chair-back; and all the time she knew that he knew she was there.

Splash went the quill into the ink again. She must speak, so she cleared her throat and said, "Hem!" and then coughed and fidgeted: the hideous scratching went on faster. "Norman," she began, and then stopped to wonder what new timidity made her voice so hoarse. Was it her fear that he was offended? "Norman," she repeated, growing bolder, "tea is ready, and your mother is waiting. We did not like to begin without you: please, come." Dr. Strath tilted his chair backward, and poised his pen in mid-air. "Is that you, Barbara? Why are you

standing behind me? I have just asked my mother to send me in a cup of tea here."

"But, Norman, do come in and have it with us: it is so cool and pleasant in the other room; and we have set the table close to the open window. Your mother does look so disappointed, and so am I." The last very softly said, she was beginning to find her task difficult; but difficulties arouse some natures to greater persistence. It was a very little thing, but Bab had set her heart on having her own way, and so she put in the last clause very softly uttered. Dr. Strath gave her one of his queer looks, and smiled grimly. "The disappointment won't be hard to bear, Barbara: please let me finish my work in peace." And then he went on writing. To leave him in peace with her mission unfulfilled was the last thing Barbara intended to do, so she only went a little closer and secretly shook the table. Dr. Strath looked up and smiled, as Nigel did, at her childishness. That smile gave Barbara courage. She leant over him now, and put her little hand coaxingly on his. "Oh do come, Norman, please. I have not been here for such a long time, and your mother really wants you: do come." Barbara had no idea how irresistible she could be when she tried. Your plain women, or rather those who think themselves plain, never know their own power. Bab had no conception of the sweetness of her voice at this minute, or the pathetic

childishness of her whole face and manner. Dr. Strath growled a little like a sulky bear, but he could not resist her; so he rose and followed her, and Barbara tried hard not to look too pleased at her triumph. The world was changing for Bab when she first began to taste the sweets of power; I mean that womanly power that can sway the will of a strong man. Mrs. Strath looked much surprised and greatly pleased when they entered the room. Her brow cleared as by magic; and then she placed a chair for her son, and began to make a loving little fuss over him, as such women will, especially mothers; and she kissed Barbara, and said a great many kind things to her; and Barbara began to feel very happy indeed, while Dr. Strath, in spite of his headache and his unfinished work, found the pretty tea-table a welcome change from his hot study; and Barbara, with her white dress and a crimson rose placed coquettishly in her brown hair, with her round, dimpled face and ringing laugh, was so sweet a picture of youth and brightness and innocence, that it was not in man's nature not to feel genial and refreshed by such pleasant surroundings: therefore, though he was silent, and said very little to anyone at first, his manner thawed visibly, and by-and-by he took to watching Barbara, and said to her in quite his old way, "What makes you so happy this evening, Barbara? You seem the very essence of a sunbeam." Barbara looked

up and down and colored a little, and then answered in her frank way, "A great many things; more things than you would care to hear, if I could tell them."

"Try me. I am not the most patient of men, but I think I could hear you out." Dr. Strath spoke jestingly, but there was a little anxiety plainly discernible in his manner. Barbara hesitated. "I think what chiefly makes me happy is that I have found my place and my work at last; and, and—met with appreciation." The last was almost inaudible.

"That needs explanation. Let us deal with the first thing. You have found your work, you say?" His voice was peremptory, but his eyes questioned her eagerly. "What work, and what place, Barbara?"

"Perhaps you will hardly understand me, but your mother will. I have been listless and unoccupied so long, that the prospect of a full and engrossing occupation, that shall leave me no time to feed upon my empty thoughts, is so great a boon that no one but myself can comprehend what it is to me."

"You mean Nigel's lessons, I suppose, and your desire of becoming an artist? I thought my cousin had effectually crushed those hopes. He said very little in your favor that day, I remember."

"And he says still less now; but for all that I can feel my own progress. You must not think I am only

ambitious, Norman; I am far more humble now in my own estimation than I have ever been."

"What an acknowledgment from Barbara Heathcote!"

"Ah! but it is true. I have not half such grand hopes now I am really working, as when I was only dreaming. I love my art dearly, and I mean to worship her always; but I do not think I shall ever be a great or even a good artist: but I mean to paint my dear old pine woods, and to paint them well, and some people will like my pictures, and buy them. I shall try and try to do better all my life long; so that at the last it may be said of me, 'Bab was an earnest worker, and an earnest thinker, and that is all.'"

Barbara had often talked in this strain to Mrs. Strath, but never to Norman; and he looked at her now with something of dawning reverence on his face. He had often thought her foolish and fanciful, morbid in her imaginings, crude, with all womanish crudeness. But after all, was it not a noble thing for this young girl to devote the best interests of her life to some high thing rather than waste it with the empty and vain trifling of other women, whose most important daily avocations seem to be, to dress, work embroidery, and kill time by dreary inches of drossy labour? Many are the foolish and empty utterances against women usurping intellectual rights, when their very conscientiousness bids them to aspire; timidly, yet

with all sense of right, they lay out their one poor little talent received from the Great Master, trading with it honestly, hoping or praying that it may yield some sweet harvest of content, or, failing that, that He, from whom proceeded the Divine afflatus, may say of them, in loving pity, "She hath done what she could." Mrs. Strath looked wistfully at her son now, to see how he had taken Barbara's speech. "You do not think it wrong for Barbara to try to be an artist, Norman? What can she do better for herself, poor child?"

"There is a discrepancy in your speech, mother. I do not think it wrong for Barbara to follow the bent of her own mind, or choose her own pursuit; but yet I hold that she could do better."

"How, and in what way?" asked Barbara, eagerly. But Dr. Strath hesitated: it seemed difficult for him to answer that question.

"Come, we have a right to demand your opinions," said his mother. "What could Barbara do better?"

"I think I must modify my last speech a little. Perhaps for the present, and as she now is, Barbara could not do better than she is now doing. She is unoccupied, restless: her life is monotonous, and we cannot deny her talent. I believe I was the first who acknowledged its existence."

"Yes, indeed, Norman, and you have my best gratitude for that."

He looked at her softly for a moment, and then continued, "I own the charm and usefulness of her employment, and its expediency, nay, its full benefit; but yet, personally and truly, I would rather see her in any other position than that she holds at present."

"Worse and worse; you are becoming perfectly enigmatical." Barbara's tone was a little impatient.

"That is because you do not understand him, my dear. Can you not speak a little more plainly, Norman?"

"Yes, if Barbara wishes; but I believe both you and she understand me well enough. You both know my views about women. I would rather see Barbara in future years a happy wife and mother than toiling at covering canvas with full hands and an empty heart."

Barbara drew a long breath, and became a little pale. There was no mistaking Norman's meaning now.

"But what," she asked, not without emotion, "if in her plan of life only the empty heart be vouchsafed her?"

"Then God help her desolation; for no artist's life, however high and noble, can satisfy a woman's heart."

"Amen," returned Barbara softly, and such a look answered her, only it was lost in the darkness.

They could not see each other's faces now for the gathering gloom. Mrs. Strath thought of ringing for

candles, but the others exclaimed against such a preposterous notion, and Dr. Strath proposed that they should take a turn in the garden. His mother was tired, but Barbara made no objection. "Only, how about the article for the 'Lancet?'" she observed rather mischievously.

"Ah, I shall have to sit up an hour later, that is all," he returned, quietly. And then they went out together, and began to pace the garden paths side by side.

"Have we quite discussed the first part of the subject, Barbara?"

"Yes; oh yes!"

"Well, now for the second, that related to appreciation I think."

"Oh, but that's nothing; nothing that will interest you I mean," she observed confusedly.

"You don't half know what will interest me, Barbara. Anything that concerns you is sure to do it. Don't you know that, little one?" Norman had never called her "little one" before, and as he said it he took her hand and put it on his arm. And again that strange, unexplainable feeling of happiness came over her; but now, as then, she did not question, she only felt contented and at rest. She could tell him anything now.

"I am a little curious as to what you mean by appreciation; suppose you tell me, Barbara."

She gave an odd shy laugh. "Perhaps I put my thoughts a little too plainly in words. What I mean is that so few people like or care for me, as they do for Hester; that when they are kind and give me sympathy, I am as glad and refreshed as a thirsty man would be who has a draught of cool pure water given him."

"What a feverish simile. Are you so thirsting for love, Barbara? Who gives you appreciation?"

"Your mother does, and Nest, and St. Ronans too. He teaches me, and is patient and good and affectionate. I don't mind his ill-humor a bit now I understand it. I can see he cares for me; he ought to—he is 'Bab's master you know'; and then there is you, Norman."

"Me, my child!" she could not see his face, for they were under the shadow of the trees now, but something in his voice was new to her. "What am I to you, Barbara?"

Barbara found she could not answer that question well, so she returned evasively, "What am I to you, you mean. Don't you remember, Norman, you called me your little friend. I am that, am I not?"

"Without doubt, Barbara. Do you like that title?"

"Yes, indeed, I am proud to bear it. I used to think you liked Hester best."

"Did you?" he returned, very much startled.

"Yes, I even thought you wanted to marry her—not that I minded that, you know." Here Barbara stopped in great confusion, conscious that she had said too much in her outspoken frankness, and very much ashamed of herself.

"You would not have minded that, Barbara?" His voice sounded cold, displeased. What had she said to hurt him?

"No, of course not; at least not then. That's when we quarrelled so much, you know. Now I think I would rather have you as you are. Hester might not have liked us to be friends," she added, laughing. Bab said this in all simplicity and good faith, but it worked wonders. Every trace of coldness vanished from Dr. Strath's voice as he answered, "And you thought I liked Hester, eh?"

"Yes, Norman, and not only Hester but Connie. I did not think you had a bit of liking for poor Bab, you laughed at her so."

"Did I?" he asked, smiling.

"Yes, you were often very rude and bitter, sir, and often cross; and I could not talk to you, or tell you anything for fear of your ridicule; but you are much kinder to me now—oh much, much kinder."

"I was always kind to you in my heart, Barbara. You do not know what a hard life I had."

"Did you, Norman? Do you mean in your profession?"

"Yes, it has been all up-hill work, a struggle with poverty, often a bitter struggle. My first duty is to my mother, Barbara."

"Of course, of course," she answered, wondering what he meant by that, but thinking he expected some sort of reply, as he paused.

"I want to give her a better home than she has at present, to restore her to a little of her former position. I think I see my way to it now. Those shares in the Spanish mine that I purchased from your father are yielding plentiful profits. I see the time, Barbara, when I may dare to hope to achieve happiness. I have been very patient, very very patient."

She wondered a little more at this, for Norman was not given to praising himself; he was generally singularly reticent on all that concerned himself.

"It is only to be patient a little longer, but it seems harder than ever just now; harder, but right. Well, so you care for your friend a little, Barbara?"

"A great deal," returned Barbara, earnestly.

"Thank God. Only—only—I fear—"

"What do you fear, Norman?"

"Nay, I cannot tell, I am getting morbid and nervous, I suppose. Oh, Barbara, Barbara, be faithful to me!"

His tone thrilled her dumbly with a sense of coming evil, and a feeling of intense sweetness. The air was full of perfumy darkness now; a young moon trembled

out at them, and withdrew into a shining cloud; great tears gathered in Barbara's eyes; a vague pain tightened at her heart, and unconsciously her hand pressed Dr. Strath's arm more closely. What did he mean? What did he dread? Why was she to be faithful to him?

They heard Mrs. Strath's voice calling to them from the lighted window. Norman stopped and unloosed Barbara's clinging hand. "You must go in alone, I have a patient to see. Tell my mother so, please."

"But I must go home, Norman, and you have not bid me good-night."

"Good night, good night," he returned impatiently, and strode away. In another moment he was beside her again. "Never forget what I have said, Barbara; you may have to remember it one day. Ah child—little Barbara—be faithful to me!" And then before she could answer he was down the garden, and she could hear the gate swing behind him.

CHAPTER II.

"BUT THE GREATEST OF THESE IS CHARITY."

"Of all the knots which nature ties,
The secret, sacred sympathies,
That, as with viewless chains of gold,
The heart a happy prisoner hold;
None is more chaste, more bright, more pure,
Stronger stern trials to endure;
None is more pure of earthly leaven,
More like the love of highest heaven,
Than that which binds in bonds how blest
A daughter to a father's breast."

W. Cunningham.

THAT night was a long puzzle to Barbara. Sleep was out of the question, a popular delusion and snare, bed only a conglomeration of hot pillows, and night-marish confusion of thought, of tumbled-down imaginations, and wide open stares into the darkness; it was all very well to lie flat, like an image, with your arms close to your sides, and shut your eyes and say you will not stir for the next quarter of an hour—in the next twenty seconds, perhaps less, the image is bolt upright again, a trifle more dishevelled and wide awake, and off again on the treadmill of endless conjecture

eked out by irritable yawns. "It is all a pack of rubbish trying to sleep," grumbled Barbara, and by-and-by, two little white feet crept hither and thither in the glimmering moonlight, and in process of time a rolled-up figure, with an intensely curly head, established itself, like a small Turk, on the low broad window-seat in a perfect cosy of pillows: "and now, if I don't think it all out and have done with it, my name's not Barbara Heathcote." And so well did she think it out, that after three hours of patient brain labor, and alternate hot and cold fits, in the midst of waning moonbeams and summer dews, she resolved it at last into three conclusions equally terse and admirable.

First, that St. Ronans was an astonishing enigma, for he certainly liked Bab, and Bab liked him.

Secondly, that she could not make out Norman at all—at all.

Thirdly, take it all in all, and the present state of politics in Europe, which was conducive to the progress of free thought, she certainly liked Norman the best.

But to arrive at these excellent conclusions had been laborious, not to say heart-searching, in the extreme, and, despite her wisdom and her twenty-one years, Barbara just missed the solution of her enigmatical questions by the want of one small golden key, which, if nicely fitted and properly applied, would certainly

have unlocked all present and future mysteries, and made the world a very different place to this one small woman. But Barbara, a prey to the most hopeless and refined sentimentalism, and given to look at all such questions from an intellectual and singularly humble point of view, harped for ever and a day on friendship, and never for a single instant touched the small chord of love, a chord which, if touched ever so lightly, would have set that passionate yearning nature aflame in a moment, but, as is the case with many another dreamer, the time had not come yet. It had never occurred to Barbara that Dr. Strath loved her; how could it?—their friendship was of too old a date, and too well disguised to allow of such knowledge on her part; her nature was too simple and childlike, too truly and painfully humble to admit such a thought, unless it were most plainly forced upon her. In her own heart she said to herself that she was not one to find favor in any man's eyes, and though she sometimes dreamt, as women will, of some stranger dropping in their midst, some wandering artist or stray satellite of fame lighting down amongst them and recognising a kindred spirit in the doctor's little daughter, wooing her in the old pine woods, and taking her to some far-away city-home, yet Bab knew these were only worthless dreams, built of summer clouds and her own vast yearnings, and always shook herself out of them with a sigh, saying that Barbara Heathcote would live

and die Barbara Heathcote—enrolled as a member of the order of the "Unappropriated Blessings,"—the maids of England.

Strange contradiction of womanhood, Barbara said this and believed it, and openly vaunted it in social and family gatherings, and yet every spring she looked out with misty eyes, and vague longing for some change—some happiness, she knew not what—some wonder and miracle, and beauty of life, that the budding days, and bright sunshine were to bring to her.

And so she looked so far that the treasure rolled to her very feet and folded in her very hands, and she did not know it, and though her heart was warm with marvellous content, she could not trace it to its source. And so this pitiable little dreamer walked and danced along the very brink of a social chasm, and what if it should engulf her and her too late discovered treasure together?

And she could not make out St. Ronans at all, or the princely gift with which he had endowed her; so she came to the conclusion that he was Bab's master, and that was all. And then she had them both up before her, and gravely arraigned them in the darkness, and took a mental photograph of them. "I don't know which I like the best," thought Bab, "and after to-night I must know," but why or to what purpose she was to apply such knowledge, never came into her head, but she had an odd instinct that she must find

out and know, and so she summoned them before her, side by side, and by a little womanish leaning to the weaker, she had a good look at St. Ronans first.

And that took her breath away and made her cross. "Why are men so beautiful?" she thought; it might be left to women. It would take an Eve to match such an Adam, and that, too, at a time when the daughters of men were fair.

And then she began to get quarrelsome and pulled his face to pieces, feature by feature, but that would not do, so she said, spitefully, that she hated a perfect face, there was nothing in it after all, and everyone knew he had an ill-tempered mouth, and a mouth that could sneer was the worst thing that a man could have; and when she found herself softening perceptibly to him in spite of herself, she would not look at him any more. "I am getting as fond of him as I am of Leigh," she exclaimed, "and that's a shame; how I wish he were my brother, for I enjoy taking care of him far too much, and yielding my own will to his. It opened my eyes a little to find how much I should miss and feel the want of him when he was gone:" there was a prodigious shake of the dishevelled head at this conjuncture. "I am much too fond of you, sir, and you a stranger to me a month ago, and no sort of a relation, as Hester would say; go away with you, I don't want to look at you any longer, and now for Dr. Strath."

And then the oddest feeling came over Barbara, for she felt as though she must hide her own face now: those words were sounding in her ears over and over again, "Be faithful to me, Barbara!—ah, child—little Barbara—be faithful to me!"

He was her friend, and she was to be faithful to him; that was all she knew, and all she cared about; but she also knew that those words would haunt her day and night, with a gracious mystery that the future only could solve. She seemed as though she must hold her breath, and tread softly ever after, waiting for she knew not what, feeling only that life after all was very good.

And she knew now instinctively that Bab's friend was dearer than Bab's master.

What was it now to her that he was the plainest man she had ever seen, that he had deep-set eyes, and an overhanging brow, and a bushy mass of ugly reddish-brown beard? She only knew that those eyes had looked at her with honest kindness, that his voice was full of sweetness, and that his touch was pleasant to her.

"God bless Bab's friend!" she whispered: it was Barbara's morning prayer.

It was good to see the quiet precision and business-like decorum with which Barbara set about her duties on the morrow, though she looked a little subdued and heavy-eyed, as was natural after so prolonged a

vigil. By admitting such a common-place fact, I am aware that I am departing from the usual plan of the sensationalist. It is quite remarkable how their favorite heroines burn the midnight lamp—desperate with some inconceivable sorrow, seldom dry-eyed, and not unfrequently damping whole pillows with deluges of tears, and yet without dimming in the least the lustre of their well-trimmed eyes, or being anything, indeed, but rather becomingly pale, unless, perhaps, "two deep pink spots burn on those cheeks usually so immaculately fair."

Barbara had shed no tears; but she had yawned much, and her eyelids were quite reddened for want of that refreshing slumber which youth so urgently demands; for, contrary to her usual habits, Barbara had not slept a wink, and so her eyes looked sleepily opaque. And there were no wild roses to be seen in her cheeks, and only the greyest of lilies, if there be such natural curiosities in the floral world. I ought to have said as grey as olives, only that would not have sounded so well; and, in fiction, is not beauty of expression more desirable than truth?—at least it would often seem so.

And all this dimness and general stupidity for want of one night's sleep! Even so, dear reader; it is a humiliating fact, but true, as an Irishman might say, that our honest, healthy, little Barbara would have made a very bad fashionable lady, and a worse

Sister of Charity. Midnight gaiety and midnight vigils would soon have exhausted all that bright vitality. Bab was a true child of nature, up with the lark, and early to bed; and her sleeping hours, with their exact and unerring punctuality, were quite household jokes. Half an hour later, and Bab nodded at prayers; at least, so Leigh averred.

And so putting two and two together there was no little stir when Barbara appeared at breakfast, like a small owl.

"Barbara has had a sleepless night; Bab has not slept a wink. Behold the eighth wonder of the world! Send for Dr. Cummings, O ye Gallipots! Barbaretta has found no solace in the sleepy god." This latter burst from Leigh, of course. Hester looked her over with motherly eyes, recommended sal volatile and a sofa in the harlequin-room. Barbara sat and smiled at them all with extinguished eyes, and sipped her coffee with a languor which would have been alarming, had it not been so evident. It was comical to see how anxiously the doctor eyed her, and put crisp bits of toast, well buttered, on her plate; while Connie, who always looked like a piece of brilliant china at breakfast-time, fluttered about her, and was overwhelming in her personal attentions. Bab, who had received all this cosseting with as much animation and grace as a dying duck in a thunder-storm, suddenly awoke to life and wide-open eyes at

hearing Hester's whispered remark that she had better defer her painting-lesson till to-morrow.

"So I think, Bab," agreed her father; "and I shall step in at St. Ronans as I pass, and tell your friend so."

"Oh, I must go!" interrupted Barbara, in alarm. "Hester is quite wrong, Daddie, and a walk this fresh morning will do me good. Do let me go down the village with you," she added, coaxingly. "And if my head's bad, I'll promise not to do a stroke of painting; but I do so want to see the studio at St. Ronans, and the garden, and all that."

"Well, well, I suppose it won't hurt you; so run along and fetch your hat. You're nothing but a spoilt child," he continued, when she came back to him, panting and breathless. "After all, Hester is right, I believe, and you would be better at home."

"I wish Hester would mind her own business," said Bab, pouting; and then she clasped her hands over her father's arm. The morning was delicious, and so was a walk with Daddie; besides, she had a question to ask him. So she cleared her throat, though it was as clear as a lark's already, and began.

"Daddie, do you remember that walk Norman and you and I had that moonlight evening?"

"Eh, what? What evening? We've had a good many moonlight evenings lately, haven't we?"

"Yes; but that evening when you were talking

about some illness round Durnford, and Susan Moggs being so dirty, and the Board of Health."

"Yes, yes," interrupted her father, hastily; "but I did not know you were with us, Barbara."

"Yes, I was. I was quite close to you, and had hold of your arm, I believe, as I have now; but I was not listening much, for I have no idea what illness you said was about Durnford—a sort of low fever, I think; but, Daddie, something Norman said about me afterwards struck me so that I can't forget it."

"I don't remember, child. Why, what was it?"

"Only such a few words, Daddie; but they were so hard and true, and they've been just like Belshazzar's writing to me ever since. Dad, I don't like even you to hear them; but he said that the poor and sick did not know Barbara among them."

"Did he say that, little one?"

"Aye, father, that he did; and—and," here the girl's eyes filled with tears, "I should not like to hear that said again to me at the last day. It would sound too dreadful then, would it not?—that the poor and sick did not know Barbara among them."

Dr. Heathcote looked grave, very grave for him, who so rarely had a reproof for one of his children.

"No, Barbara, that must never happen. I am glad you have spoken to me, my child; it is good and brave of you, and I think I can help you. But, first,

I must tell you—only you must not think it hard of me to say so—that I am very, very thankful to have this confidence; for I have long felt that something has been wanting in you, and I have often gone near to being disappointed in my little daughter."

"Disappointed in me, father?" and then the sweetness of his smile, that bright, loving smile, disarmed her. She crept nearer to his side, like a little child. "Why don't you help me to be good and do my duty, Daddie?"

"God helping me, so I will, Barbara. Heaven forbid that one of my children should ask my assistance in vain. Try and tell me a little better and more clearly, my dear, why you are acting and feeling so differently from your sisters. Why, even my little Connie here is treading in Hester's footsteps. You should hear what the old women at the almshouses say about her, while the matron of the Union tells me that Hester is like an angel among them, God bless her beautiful face, for I am sure she is one to her old father. I don't think we can spare her to Geoffrey Hunsden, can we, Barbara?"

"Oh, father, don't let him marry her! He is not worthy of her," cried Barbara, impulsively. Another time this well-merited praise of one whom she always regarded as her successful rival would have kindled the bitterest jealousy in Barbara's bosom; but just now she was far too humble and conscience-stricken

for such an unworthy feeling; besides, the influence of Bab's friend was already beginning to work. She must do something to deserve his affection. "If you wish to be happy, be good," he had often said to her; but now, because she was happy, she wished to be good. So do generous natures reverse the general order of things. "Oh, father, do not let him marry her!" Barbara had said; but Dr. Heathcote, with a brief sigh, answered—for he alone knew, or rather guessed, Hester's secret, "There are very few men worthy of Hester. I knew one once, but he is dead now, and Norman Strath is another;" but Barbara interrupted him in quite a flurry.

"Oh, no, no. Hester would never care for Norman; you are wrong there, Daddie!"

Her father looked at her curiously and pressed her arm with a smile. "Am I, Barbara? Well, Norman's little friend ought to know. After all, Geoffrey Hunsden is a good man, and I don't know that we need more; but we are running away from our subject, little woman."

Barbara looked rather ashamed.

"Yes, and we are near the end of our walk, too; how tiresome! and there is no time for explanations."

"Not even to answer my question."

"What question, Daddie?"

"Why you are the only one of us who have

never felt bound to do anything for our poorer neighbors."

Now, indeed, Barbara hung her head.

"We must probe a wound sometimes, my dear, and find out the root of a disease. Let us try and discover the reason of this life-long apathy and selfishness; for is it not selfishness, little one, to be wrapped up in our pursuits, however worthy, and our own dreams, however grand, to the exclusion of the only duty worth living for—the amelioration of suffering, and the good of our fellow-creatures?"

Dr. Heathcote was a deeply religious man; but he never talked, only acted his religion, though there were those who said that by the bedside of the hardened or the dying the doctor was as good as any clergyman; and when asked his convictions on such subjects, he had been heard once to say, that next to the priestly office, he thought there was no profession so deeply and divinely responsible for the good of souls, as well as for the good of bodies, as the work of a physician.

Therefore, though he rarely rebuked even an erring child, it was at once his habit and delight to drop in a word in season. Those only who lived with him knew the habitual sweetness and wisdom of the man, and how he would convey a reproof in a jest, and make a wrong-doer ashamed by the quiet dignity of a look. Barbara, who adored her father, used to

speak of the continual sunshine of his presence as of something holy; seldom, indeed, did she venture on any of her petulant speeches or cross-grained satire before him, or bring out a particle of her hoarded wrath till he was far down the village, and she had no longer reason to fear the soft-spoken "Barbara!" that always reduced her to an abashed silence.

They had come to the turning now which led down by the fir-plantations to St. Ronans, but Barbara never quitted her father's arm; she only walked thoughtfully on. How was she to answer him? How was she to answer this question with her usual frankness and truth, now that she was so self-condemned in her own eyes, and he was disappointed in her? At last she said,—

"I think I have found it out: it is nothing more or less than moral cowardice."

The doctor nodded, with an approving smile.

"That's my brave Barbara; you see we have got to the root of the matter at last, have we not?"

"I think so, father."

"No doubt—no doubt, there is nothing like this bugbear of moral cowardice, after all, for frightening us off the path of duty: it is all the more dangerous and insidious an enemy, because it wears an amiable front, and tempts us to no daring dereliction of duty, but only omissions which seem often puerile and

innocent in the extreme. You see, I speak feelingly, Barbara, for I also am daunted by this bugbear; it often makes me hold my tongue for fear of giving pain, so that sometimes I miss giving a wholesome rebuke, when the said rebuke would be salutary and useful. I am afraid you have inherited this failing from your father, Barbara; but we must grapple with it inch by inch, as we would with any grave sin, and we shall, 'Deo gratias,' get the victory at last."

Barbara had never heard her father speak so seriously before; it awed her, but at the same time gave her strength. After a little while, she said,—

"I think my special form of moral cowardice is the rooted aversion I have to seeing any kind of physical or mental pain; and this is what has made me dread coming in contact with our poor. I was so afraid that I might have to witness painful scenes, and that their miseries might haunt me, without my having the means of alleviating them."

"Is Hester, then, devoid of feeling?" returned Dr. Heathcote reproachfully; "or do you think that Norman and I do not meet with harrowing sights, and every form of squalid and physical wretchedness, which it is our profession and happiness to relieve?"

Barbara was silent.

"'I was naked, and ye clothed me; sick and in

prison, and ye visited me.' Ah, Barbara, my little daughter, when the great Remunerator casts up your dealings with His poor, how will such selfish excuses avail you then?"

"Father, I see it; I have seen it a long time. I am ready to go with you now, if you like."

"No, not to-day, but to-morrow; but I cannot take you on my rounds, if that is what you mean. There is low fever round Durnford; and though, thank God, it has not made its appearance yet in Sunningford, still we must be on our guard, as I told Hester; and as I have already restricted her visits, it will not do to let you begin yours. But, as I don't like damping a good resolution, you may go and see an old patient of mine who lives just on the brow of Bex Hill,—there can be no possible risk of contagion there; but promise me one thing, Barbara, that you go into no cottage but where I send you."

"Yes, yes," returned Barbara impatiently; she wanted to hear more of this woman, but, to her vexation, the doctor drew out his heavy gold repeater, and, after some consummate calculation that its age and eccentricities demanded, put it back into his pocket with a face of dismay.

"Why, you chatterbox, you have nearly made me lose an appointment: run off; and if you meet Norman by the way, tell him I am at Widow Green's."

"Very well," answered Barbara, and she put up her face and kissed him gratefully, and the hope of seeing Norman kept her company all the way back; but she was disappointed, for she did not encounter him till she reached the lodge-gates of St. Ronans, and then he rode by so fast that, though she ran in the hope of attracting his attention, he did not see her, and was out of sight in a moment. "Norman always wants to make people believe that he is riding on an errand of life or death," said Barbara grudgingly; and then she turned into the trim lawns and pleasant shades of St. Ronans.

Barbara had seen the gardens often, but she had never been in the house itself; and as all her notions of splendour were derived from the ancient shabbiness of Hunsden Park, she was not a little amazed when she found herself in the St. Ronans' drawing-room.

"Why, it is a room fit for a queen!" cried Barbara; and then she paused, on finding herself reflected in a full-length mirror, and began curtseying to it in mock satire: "Oh, you little frump—you dowdy," she observed, apostrophising her own image, "what have you done with your eyes, I wonder?" and she subsided, preternaturally solemn, on a great velvet lounge, only just in time, as it happened, for the door opened suddenly; but, after all, it was only Nest, in her fresh morning dress, and with a rose in her girdle.

"Oh, you dear child, Barbara, is it you? Nie has been waiting for you an hour; we've been placing your easel, and were afraid you were not coming after all. Come along; we must not wait a moment." And so saying, she half dragged and half led Barbara into the depths of the large shady hall, and then into a small side anteroom full of ferns, as green as a bower, and pushing open a door, cried out, "Here she is, Nie. Come in, Barbara."

Barbara held her breath, and trode over the threshold daintily; and her eyes got large and round in a moment, for she found herself in such a beautiful room as she had never been in in her life before.

A long shady room, with three noble windows opening on to a smooth green lawn, with wonderful carved cabinets and tall ebony chairs, old Venetian mirrors and grand pieces of coloring strewn hither and thither in some marvellously worked banners, and odd pieces of velvet drapery, together with all sorts of precious objects of ormolu and bric-à-brac, and hoards of old china and antique vases gathered in years of foreign travel. Barbara had read and dreamt of such a room: no wonder she now stood daintily upon the threshold. In the midst of them all, at his easel, stood her old acquaintance, St. Ronans, dressed in a suit of some strange foreign stuff that looked all white and cool, with no collar, and the ends of his blue tie knotted loosely together, looking like a German

student, with his rough light hair and budding moustache.

"You are handsomer than ever; that's what you are, Grey eyes," groaned Barbara. But of course she did not say so; she only stood quietly by, while St. Ronans put in a finishing stroke, and then turned round and quietly greeted her.

When he saw her admiring face, he broke out into a laugh. "Why, what great eyes you have, little wolf! Come here, and tell me how you liked your picture, and what you have done with yourself since we parted twenty-four hours ago—and what you think of my studio—and why you are so pale. Is she not pale, *ma mie?* Whatever has my pupil been doing with herself?"

But Barbara was not a bit pale now, what with her hot face and his pleasant scrutiny. She had rather a difficulty in warding off the last question; but she poured out such a volley of thanks for the picture, mingled with notes of admiration, that she completely turned his thoughts into another channel; indeed, he received her homage of praise most superbly, and seemed to court it rather than otherwise, by opening manifold portfolios, and displaying their varied contents before her admiring eyes—doing the honours of his studio, in fact, with the magnificence of an artistic sultan; and they had so much to say and do, that they had no lesson after all.

For after Nigel had shown her all his home and foreign productions, and Barbara's rhapsodies had sunk into a silence more eloquent than words, he proceeded to overhaul all his treasures of art for her inspection; and as this was a most fitting opportunity for forming her taste, and as this was only to be done by making her admire the things he admired, and as, even in matters of art, Barbara was not naturally docile, but had a decided will of her own, it took rather a round-about process and a great many words to convince her judgment and her eyes; and so before they had half completed the tour of the studio, and she was still in the midst of a most forcible description of an Etruscan vase, found, according to antiquarians, amidst the lava of a buried city, the luncheon bell rang on their incredulous ears.

"Who could have believed it!" exclaimed St. Ronans, with a slightly vexed air; "and I have an engagement immediately afterwards. Well, never mind, Barbara; you must come earlier to-morrow, and spend the whole day. The Madre will be out, and we will have a little dinner all to ourselves, you and I and Nest;—oh, we will have old Norman to make the quartette. Come, is it a bargain?"

"Oh, yes!" cried Barbara, joyfully; and then a cold doubt rose to her mind, "but will Lady Strath approve?"

St. Ronans laughed lightly. "Lady Strath likes

everything that I like. I am master in this house, never fear; so you will come to-morrow."

"Do come," whispered Nest, as she twined her arms round her. "I must show you the house, and my own room, and all my pretty things." And the gong sounding again, this time rather impatiently, Barbara promised more decidedly, and took up her hat to go; but, as she made her exit, she narrowly escaped meeting Lady Strath on the terrace—"a piece of good luck," as she wickedly told Hester afterwards.

There was a slight cloud on Lady Strath's face, as she took her seat at the table. "I caught sight of your new whim in the distance, Nigel."

"An ambiguous phrase, Madre mia; do you mean my new pointer?"

"Oh no, Nigel; if it were Zoe, I think I could more easily forgive your infatuation, for the beauty of her glossy coat; but I was speaking of your last absurdity. Fancy, with your refined taste, picking up such an oddity as that Barbara for notice."

St. Ronans frowned. "My oddity has talent, mother."

"Well, so has Bep." Bep was a small monkey, with very bright eyes, that St. Ronans kept for his occasional delectation. "Now I come to think of it, this new oddity is not unlike Bep."

"Oh, mother, how can you!" and Nest looked

as usual, rather flushed and a little tremulous, and Geoffrey Hunsden near her with his handsome florid face set in a disc of light.

Barbara's entrance made a little stir. Connie looked round curiously, but strummed on; the doctor took off his spectacles, while his paper fell with a crackling sound, which roused Leigh, who brought his hot face into view and yawned; Geoffrey stretched his legs a little more and looked sheepish. Barbara was aware they were all watching her. "I am a woman of my word," she thought, and then she went and kissed her father.

"You are late, little woman. Did not Norman tell you you were wanted?"

Barbara nodded and gave her hand to Sir Geoffrey. "How do you do, Geoffrey?" she said, with a little emphasis, as though he must be painfully conscious by this time of failing health; and then she went round and kissed Hester. "I am a woman of my word," she repeated again to herself and sat down, and that was Bab's congratulation.

Connie played soft music; Leigh stretched himself and went and stood by her. "It's awfully slow," Barbara could hear him say.

"Why, Bab, where are your manners?" said Dr. Heathcote, pinching her cheek. "Has Norman told you the grand news? Surely you are going to congratulate your sister."

"I hate congratulations," returned Barbara, pettishly. "Every one knows that every one else wishes them happiness, and that sort of thing. Of course, I hope Essie will be happy;" and then, with effort, as if she had suddenly remembered it, "and Geoffrey too." No one could help laughing, though it was rather awkward and uncomfortable. Geoffrey moved his legs uneasily, and grew rapidly hotter. Hester looked up reproachfully, and then, seeing her red eyes, grew mollified in a moment.

"I don't think that is quite well done, my little Bab," said Dr. Heathcote; but Hester came to her relief.

"Barbara means well, father; it is only her way."

"Of course, of course," repeated Barbara, dreamily. Hester's hand was flashing in the lamp-light. There was a brilliant hoop of diamonds on one finger that shone like a mimic fire. Barbara sat and watched it as though it fascinated her; then she looked up sharply at Geoffrey Hunsden and caught him in the middle of a yawn. It was like an inspiration. It woke her up in a moment. "What a sleepy party," she said briskly. "Connie, why don't you play louder? The lanes are full of glow-worms, Geoffrey, they will startle your horse when you go home." Her voice had a friendly tone of interest in it. "Your mother goes to bed very early, does she not?" A bright expression crossed Geoffrey's face; it was as though she had signed his release.

"I had no idea it was so late," he replied. "Doctor, why did you keep me? Eleven o'clock! Why, 'pon honor, Lady H.—my mother, I mean—will be wondering what can have become of me."

"Yes, I think you had better go, Geoffrey; you will come again to-morrow." And Hester smiled full in his face.

Sir Geoffrey stopped, embarrassed. "Oh, of course, if you wish it, Hester—that is—I was—I had intended calling up at St. Ronans—just a polite call, you know, but"—here his face lengthened, "I can come up here all the same afterwards, only——"

"I shall not expect you." There was a little cloud on the brow of his betrothed, even Sir Geoffrey noticed it.

"Oh, of course I shall come," he returned with lumbering tenderness, "you don't suppose that I meant—that you—that I, I mean——"

"Oh, good gracious! no, Geoffrey," interrupted Barbara, to her sister's great relief, "we don't expect anything. How can you disturb your mother's peace of mind in this way? Essie won't be thanked for it, I can tell you."

"What a girl you are, Barbara," chuckled Sir Geoffrey, and then he straightened himself and stood erect; he was a very fine-looking man when he held himself well, though he never showed to advantage in evening dress; he looked far better in his high boots

and rough tweed shooting-coat, but still there was something in his fresh good-humoured face with all his bearishness and *mauvaise honte* that made Barbara feel very sorry for him. A look of chagrin, an added heaviness, almost dulness, as though the day had held no special joy for him.

"Has it for Hester?" thought Barbara, but she could not tell. Hester looked much as usual as she leisurely folded her work and bade adieu to her lover; "And tell your mother, Geoffrey, that we will all come to dinner on Thursday."

"Who do you mean by all, Hester?" said Barbara, in alarm; and her look added, "I hope you've not been accepting an invitation for me."

Hester answered the look. "I could not help it," she replied, rather apologetically; but her manner seemed conscious, and Dr. Heathcote interfered.

"You are such a child for your age, Bab, that you never help anybody; don't you see that this dinner at Lady Hunsden's is rather a ceremonial affair—an acknowledgment, in fact, of Hester as her son's *fiancé?* It is to be a family party, do you see, and we shall all go."

"I don't see why every one is to be victimised becausedEssie is engaged; and every one knows I hate dinner-parties."

"Oh, do go, Geoffrey," said Hester, much displeased;

"we shall never end if Bab is going to begin one of her arguments."

But the doctor detained him.

"Barbara, my child, you are acting selfishly and distressing your sister as usual. I thought better things of you. It is my wish that you accept Lady Hunsden's invitation, and I hope you will tell Geoffrey so before he goes."

"All right, doctor," interposed Geoffrey. "I'll give my mother a pretty message from Barbara," for which good-natured speech Barbara could have kissed him.

"Now you're cross, Daddie," she said, when the so-called lovers had left the room.

"No, not cross—only sorry, Barbara."

"Then you're not to be sorry any longer, Dad," and Bab brushed her cheek against his grey beard. "Be quick and kiss me, and give me a good hug, and say you're sorry for being sorry, and all that, or I'll go and keep awake all night, and cry my eyes out."

"God bless my foolish Bab."

"Amen, Daddie."

Bab did not find her own solitary thoughts conducive to repose that night; first she began sobbing over them like a baby. "Oh! why was I so cross when I want to be good—and I a woman of my word?" And then it occurred to her that she had not been generous to Hester; "she'll be miserable

enough with that stupid, good Geoffrey, without my making her more so," and thereupon her conscience began to prick her. "I think I'll go and say something more to her before I go to sleep."

It was very late, but women of their word don't stop to weigh actions, so Bab passed her astonished Cerberus, and began groping downstairs.

"How I hate darkness," she said, when she had rolled down two steps and bruised herself, and then she picked herself up and trundled on; it was too late to go back for a candle, so by dint of feeling walls, and bringing up her fingers sharp against door-handles, and knocking her head against a bracket or two, she managed to find the right door at last.

"Why, I declare they're both asleep," thought Bab; but a moment's survey in the dim light undeceived her; there was only one head—Connie's, on the pillow—but there was a heap of clothes at the foot that might mean something, so Bab guided herself by the bedpost and peeped round; it was all shapeless and undefined. Yes—no—surely there was a line of crouching shoulders; should she touch it?—no, it would startle Hester; she was only saying her prayers. Barbara stood doubtfully; should she stay and speak, or should she go back to her room? There was a stirring of drapery, a movement, then something resembling a stifled sob. "Essie, I am here," whispered Barbara, softly; she did not like to

waken Connie, and even then Connie moved uneasily.

But there was no response, only two white arms gathered slowly above her head, and then fell forward, and then came a husky whisper. "What am I doing, Arthur? Arthur, why did not you save me?" The darkness, the strange movement, and the stranger words, almost curdled Barbara's blood.

"Essie, are you asleep? Get up, Essie." Hester rose in a moment.

"Good Heavens, Barbara! what is the matter? How you frightened me."

"Nothing to what you did me," returned Barbara, with her teeth chattering. "Were you dreaming, Essie, or were you saying your prayers?"

"People generally say their prayers when they kneel down, do they not?" returned Hester, impatiently. "Be quick and tell me what you want; we are up dreadfully late."

"Yes; but don't be angry, Hester. I ought to tell you, ought I not? I heard you say something, you did not know I was near—but I ought to tell you——"

"Well, what a fuss you are making," but Hester's voice was not quite steady, "and goodness, how you are shaking, Barbara."

"I am so cold, and it is so dark, and you said such funny things, Hester," and Barbara repeated her

words as well as her chattering teeth would allow her. "You did say that, Essie, I am sure."

"Did I?" returned Hester, harshly. "Well, good night." There was no evasion—no denial; all the Heathcotes scorned a lie: but Hester could have bitten out her tongue; her bosom rose and fell stormily.

"There, I knew you would be angry," cried Bab, piteously, "but how could I help it? you will be quite safe with me, Hester; I'll never say a thing to any living soul."

"Can I trust you, Barbara?"

"Yes—yes," returned Barbara, eagerly; was her sister going to give her her confidence? but Hester's next few words disappointed her; she did not speak for a moment, and then said—

"You will keep your promise, Bab?"

"Of course; if I say I will, I always keep my word."

"Then we shall say no more about it, and you are too honorable to try and find out if I meant, or if I did not mean, anything by what I said. Yes, I do trust you fully and entirely; and now what did you want with me?"

Barbara tried to hide her disappointment.

"Oh nothing; that is, nothing in particular." Then recovering herself, "I only wanted to say that perhaps I was a little unkind this evening not to congratulate you more warmly, but——"

"Don't, Barbara, don't, I can't bear it." And Bab shrank back almost alarmed at the vehemence of her tone. "You at least are true, and can spare me this," and then her voice softened. "I understood you this evening, Barbara, and that is more than you did me. I saw you were sorry for me."

"Oh so sorry, so sorry," and, for the first time in her life, she threw herself into her sister's arms. "He is good, but not good enough for you, Essie; he will make you miserable."

"Hush, dear," replied Hester, very tenderly, but she pressed Barbara to her warmly as she spoke; "you don't understand—you cannot—why I am marrying him; sometimes I hardly know myself. But my life is very hard and cold, and he is a good man; he will take care of me; I shall have greater chances for usefulness and work: it is so narrow here," and she shuddered; "he will make me happier."

"No, no," returned Barbara, mournfully, "he will not do that; you are making the first great mistake of your life, Hester, and one day you will know it."

Something wet touched Barbara's face; there was a long silence; but, when she spoke, Hester's voice had a forced cheerfulness in it.

"Come, come, we must have no more of these forebodings, Barbara; why, there's Leigh looked as glum as possible all the evening. I can't think what

has come over the boy; you must look after him, and brighten him up a little. I tell you what it is, Bab, we are all over-tired and excited; you must run away now, and get back into your warm crib, or you will be catching your death of cold."

"I don't feel like going to sleep — not a bit, Essie."

"No, nor I, but we'll both try; there, say good night, you poor tired child, and away with you."

"Good night," said Barbara, in a dreary voice; and she stumbled up to her den, and was asleep in a moment.

It was full sunshine when she awoke, and Connie was standing over her with a cup of coffee, and a face of mischievous glee.

"Good morning, Barbara; I hope you have had a good sleep."

Bab blinked drowsily.

"Why, whatever is the time, Con?"

"Time? Oh, it's only nine o'clock, and as fine a summer's morning as you can wish to see. There, drink your coffee, Barbara. Hester sent it with her love; and father says will you be sure and go and see Mrs. Jackson this morning; she lives in the first little white cottage you come to on Bex Hill, after you've passed the Blue Boar and Sam Tyler's smithy."

"Very well," answered Barbara, rather indif-

ferently, but she colored up to the roots of her hair; she had forgotten all about Mrs. Jackson!

As usual, her remorse took an irascible turn. Connie was tip-toeing inquisitively round the room, in her restless fashion, and was called to order in a moment.

"I wish you would go down, Connie, and not fidget about so."

"That's all the thanks I get for bringing you that nice hot coffee," returned Connie, slightly aggrieved.

"The coffee is very well," grumbled Barbara, "only too sweet; not but what that is a good fault, Con, and thanks to you all the same." And then she got mollified and condescending in a minute, and expatiated a good deal on the benefit of early rising, and the necessity of setting a good example to the poor you are visiting by laying aside all unnecessary vanities, and only inciting them to perfect cleanliness and sobriety.

"'Cleanliness is next to godliness.' I wish you would find out that text, Con, it is somewhere in Romans or Corinthians, I think—there's my Bible—no, it's not dusty, a well-used Bible can't be; just look it out while I dress. I like to arm myself with a useful text or two, and I think that is sure to come in first."

"I don't believe it's a text at all," pouted Connie,

rather disgusted with her task. "Cleanliness is what, Barbara?"

"Next to godliness, dear—it's St. Paul all over. I declare I could almost put my finger on it without looking; but when you make an assertion it is always well to quote chapter and verse, so look in Romans and Corinthians first, and after that you may try the lesser Epistles."

So Connie did as she was bid, and rummaged text by text, and chapter by chapter, but of course in vain. Barbara came by-and-by, and they did a great deal of searching, but after an hour they were forced to give it up.

"There, I told you it was not a text," cried Connie, triumphantly; and Barbara, to her chagrin, was obliged to give in, so she turned her thoughts to matters of greater importance, viz., to set that same example of cleanliness and sobriety in her own person. It cost her a good deal of care and much searching in a chest of castaway raiments; but she was dressed presently, and standing out in the sunny lane, drawing on a pair of thread gloves with great complacency.

"I wish I could meet Miss Vokes," she said to herself. "I think she would own I understand my business, and am up to district work."

Now Miss Vokes was a sort of evangelical deaconess, one of those feminine right arms that clergymen are much given to depend upon—a

cheerful, loud-voiced spinster, who lived alone in a little red brick cottage in Sunningford; dressed in rather shabby finery, and whose heart was better than her head; she led a sort of Dorcas existence, was more of a charwoman than a lady visitor to her poor neighbours, would scrub their floors as well as read a chapter to them, stood sponsor to half the babies in the village, and was the terror of all drunkard husbands by the way she rated them when sober, feared no one, and minded no one but the doctor, to whom she was a parish factotum, working under his and Norman's orders as humbly as though she were some workhouse drudge. "So-and-so is dying; send for Miss Vokes," was quite an ordinary sentence in the mouths of both, and the number of death-beds she had attended, the dying eyes she had closed, was known only to those two men, who always spoke of her with such quiet reverence. Such was the nursing mother in Israel, to whom this babe and quondam beginner, Barbara, felt herself drawn to set an example, "For her plaid silks, her little bits of faded ribbon, her curls, and her finery, sicken one," said puritan Barbara; and if she had met her, how Miss Vokes would have stared.

It was a glorious July day, and Bab wore a greasy old brown dress that had long been consigned to oblivion on account of neutral and conflicting tints, but it was of that special Quaker brown commonly

called snuff-brown, and nothing else would suit Barbara; so she had pulled it out from under a pile of other things, much creased and rather fusty, and had arrayed her small form therein, with a certain pride in its shabbiness that was quite inexplicable. "It was a dear old gown," Bab thought, as she put it on, for it bore the traces of many past pleasures indelibly interwoven in its warp and woof. She had worn it new one Christmas night, when they had snapdragon, and there in the front breadth was the small round hole that Leigh had burnt in it; there was the smear of ink too that reminded her of a pleasant evening at the Rectory, when Sydney Herbert had upset the inkstand over her, and she remembered how contrite he had been, and the fuss Mr. Herbert had made about it; but that was nothing to the paint splashes and the grease, every one of them bearing witness to pleasant winter mornings and winter nights, when they had roasted chestnuts at the fire, and made blackened toffee, while Barbara stood with the great sugary spoon, gravely basting her dress every time she ladled the contents.

And Connie had been solemnly looking out—"Cleanliness next to godliness," while Barbara manipulated the greasy folds of the dear old dress which was to rebuke Miss Vokes' interminable plaids; but this was not all.

A small black shawl, which bore its age in its face,

and most certainly belonged to Mrs. Gamp's grandmother, was well drawn over Bab's shoulders, and pinned as she had seen her old nurse do it, tightly over her chest; a garden hat completed her costume, and in every feature there was repressed but tremendous action—Miss Vokes was nothing to her. Bab longed secretly to meet Miss Vokes, and she did not; you never do come across the person you want, that is one unerring axiom of natural philosophy, and there is another yet more certain, that you are sure to encounter the person you want to avoid, and it was rather hard on Barbara, knowing him as she did, that she should meet St. Ronans; Norman would not have been so bad, but St. Ronans—well, it was hard upon Barbara. It made her a little nervous, too, to see the cool stare with which he honored her; it was pointed, to say the least of it, it was comprehensive also, it took in every grease spot, every faded breadth, every crease and mangle in a moment. She felt she hated him.

"Why, it is not you, Barbara!" when well drawled out, as it was now, Barbara's name certainly had that sheep-bleating sound that she often attached to it—"certainly not you, Barbara!"

"Yes, it is I, St. Ronans; how is Nest? quite well I hope—not tired from last night?" this very politely.

"Nest, oh she's all right; no, I forgot, she has a

headache and is not down yet. Where are you going, Barbara?" He had turned and was walking on with her, an attention she would gladly have dispensed with; he was walking slowly too, and the sun was hot; Bab's patience was at fever heat.

"I think I must say good bye to you, St. Ronans; you are dawdling too much for me. I have to go all the way to Bex Hill."

"And who lives at Bex Hill—may I ask?"

"Oh, a patient of Daddie's I am going to see, a Mrs. Jackson. I am not a district-visitor—not exactly, I mean, but I shall be soon, so I am getting my hand in," and she eyed her gown complacently.

"Are you going out charing for Mrs. Jackson, Barbara?" It was very rude, but then St. Ronans always did say rude things, only he said them in such a fascinating manner that you could not be angry with him; his manner took the edge off his words, blunted them in fact, but Barbara got rather sulky, and would not answer. There was latent mischief in Nigel's eyes, you could see the spirit of fun was too strong to be resisted, so he went on.

"Charwomen always make pincushions of themselves; they generally have large families, don't they? I always thought that charwomen, babies, and pins go together; how they can talk, and scold their children as they do with their mouths full of them—pins, I mean—I can't think. Conjurors are nothing to them."

pained and frightened, as she always did when anyone seemed displeased, as Nigel did now; but Lady Strath did not appear to notice it.

"Come, now, Nigel, own that you see the resemblance in your favorite to Bep. I think I shall call her so; it is much shorter, and quite as pretty as Barbara."

"You are in a complimentary mood, mother." There was an ominous gleam in his eyes.

"I am glad you think so. Now I come to compare the two, I am almost of opinion that the good looks are on Bep's side."

What more she was going to add never transpired; for, to her unmitigated amazement, Nigel uttered an exclamation, rather strong than pleasant, and left the room; and Lady Strath was left in peace to digest her joke as best she might.

And she did digest it—and so well, too, that she came to the conclusion that, whereas she had been placidly indifferent to Nigel's pet and pupil, she now cordially disliked her; and something that was half distrust and half fear mingled with her dislike, and made her heaven of content in time little better than one long brooding cloud.

CHAPTER III.

BARBARA REFUSES TO CONJUGATE "AMO."

Iago: What an eye she has! Methinks it sounds a parley of provocation.

Cassio: An inviting eye; and yet methinks right modest.

Shakspeare.

"From which I escaped heart free,
With the least little touch of spleen."

Tennyson.

THIS was another red-letter day in Barbara's special and peculiar calendar; in speaking of it afterwards she always called this visit to St. Ronans a glimpse of an earthly paradise. This was her way of talking, you see, a sort of girlish hyperbole of expression; but yet in all our lives, in yours and mine, reader, have there not been such days, some of them veritable holy days, which have stood apart from all others after the manner of old saints, each in its niche, with its separate auriole round its head—days of proud benison and of choice pleasure, when the sky was never so blue, and our hearts never so full of sunshine, and life was so good—so good that we thought we could never be tired, never weep, never grow

"weary of well-doing," and all the future was transfigured before us. "Let us eat and drink, for to-morrow we die," such was the motto of the wise epicurean, speaking from the depths of a blindfold philosophy, and gauging life at its lowest. "Master, it is good for us to be here;" so spake in other language the bold disciple, when the awful overshadowing of visible glory drew from him the utterance of mysterious longing. "Master, it is good for us to be here:" is not such the unspoken yearning of every human heart? It is good for us—never to be weary, never to shed idle tears over unceasing wrecks: here we would tarry in some terrestrial temple, or some quiet of domestic peace; here would we erect our tabernacle; here the haven where we would be—"Master, it is good for us to be here." Ah, not for us Mount Tabor in the wilderness, and not for us the calm of unbroken rest; already, as we descend from transcendental heights of inner communings, we find dressed for our needs some meal of bitter herbs of which we must needs partake; let us gird up our loins, then, and eat humbly, and as faithful pilgrims make no long tarrying at the earthly shrines they visit, so let us shroud up our past blessings, burying our dead out of sight, not longing, not lingering, not regretting, bearing present evil with what patience we may, till we come at last to those portals whose name is peace.

Grave words to be used here—a digression, unpardonable, it may be, in the eyes of some who think such subjects and such thoughts out of place in a work of pure fiction. There is a time and place for all things, they say: true, dear friend; yet a word spoken in season, how good it is! and it may be that even here a grain of seed scattered broadcast out of a feeble hand may find some soil by the wayside in some light heart, some giddy heads whom sermons fail to touch, and so even here there may be a little of the Master's work done.

And yet again, how often, in the midst of some gay smatter of words, the chariot wheels of fancy drag heavily, and a sort of sadness predominates, when life seems suddenly to press on us with awful seriousness, when we feel, as it were, the pulsation of the great heart of humanity beating in wild tumultuous throbs amidst wars and rumors of wars, and the great cry of created anguish ascending to its Creator, when our brains refuse to labour, and we blow down our airy fabrics with a breath of scorn? And only truth—truth—seems the one thing needful in this chaos of doubt and dread. "Life is real—life is earnest," says our favorite American poet. Amen, so be it. We must all subscribe to that now-a-days, when Paris has capitulated, and England has many female doctors, and no army to speak of. After all, that old epicurean was right in his limited-liability

view of the subject, "Let us eat and drink, for to-morrow we die." Who knows where we shall be twenty years hence, if we be alive? who can tell what might happen in this period of steam and electric telegraph by that time? Perhaps the Anglican Greek Church and Ultramontanes may have settled their difficulties, and, in company with the Freemasons and other secret societies of Modern, United, and Imperial Germany, may have consolidated forces, and be on the high road to start a last crusade to restore the Jews to Palestine, and bring about the millennium. Pardon, pardon a thousand times; where was I? In the name of all sobriety, let us retrace our steps; lest we break out in a fresh place, and return to the subject-matter of our chapter, which, amidst this great cannonading, seems like dropping a smooth round pebble in the sea. But why need we complain, if we attain our object, which is merely to draw a circle, and raise a froth, and quietly disappear in an eddy?

"I don't know but what it is worth while being born to live one such long delicious day," thought Barbara, when she awoke on the morrow; and, as she thought of it all, introspection and retrospection became a delightful process. Some people, who have Barbara's nature, always chew the cud of their past pleasures; they ruminate on the past with ever-increasing relish. A well-digested pleasure never palls on the mental palate; there is nothing so sickening

as satiety,—enough is as good as a feast. Barbara's healthy cravings required no richly-spiced condiments, but when they came they were all the more enjoyed from former abstinence. First, they had a long delightful morning in the studio. Not that they had much of a lesson, after all: when Barbara had painted for an hour, and was just well warmed up to her subject, Nigel threw his arms up over his head, and proposed a change of occupation.

"Very well," answered Barbara, in a tone of regret, and she put aside her palette with slow reluctance, eyeing sadly her well-mixed colors; but in another ten minutes she had forgotten all about it, for she was seated on the floor, in the midst of portfolios, costly prints and photographs, with St. Ronans kneeling up in the midst, enriching every view and picture, as he showed it to her, with anecdotes and adventures, some ludicrous, some pathetic, while Barbara looked and listened, and thought him the cleverest and most amusing companion in the world, and felt almost as if she were on a moral Tom Tiddler's ground, picking up gold and silver; and before they had thought the morning half gone, Nest shyly summoned them to a dainty little luncheon served up in the small green anteroom, in the midst of ferns and orchids; and afterwards they went out into the garden. They were very pretty gardens, gay, and shaded, and cool, as they should be, but rather too trim and well

ordered for Barbara's taste, who liked wildness in nature, and preferred her own dark lawn at home to these brilliant parterres and terraces blazing with scarlet geraniums.

But the grass was like nothing she ever felt—green as an emerald, and soft, springy, and smooth as velvet. Barbara would have liked to have rolled down the slope, as she had seen the school-children do at Hunsden Park; but remembering she was grown up, she and Nest had a run down instead, and never stopped till they came to the brink of a fair sheet of water, quite a miniature lake, and there they found St. Ronans paddling about lazily in a very small boat under the elm trees. He put to shore on seeing them, and took them in—a piece of good nature he dearly rued, for Barbara nearly upset them twice, besides steering them on to the duck-islands in the midst of a willow tree, and sending them three times most violently on to the land, by mismanaging her oars. She got on better afterwards, and rowed them about till she was a red as a peony, and panted like a grampus; but she told Nest afterwards that she thought she managed her oars very gracefully, as St. Ronans had said she got on like a crab, "and a crab's movements are retrograde or sidelong, are they not, Nest?—I am sure I forget which—and that is just what rowing ought to be; and did not I feather my oars prettily? But, oh, just look at the blisters on my hands;" and as Barbara

raised her palms daintily, she had a twinge of remorse for her afternoon's amusement, for Bab's one weakness was a dislike to spoiling her hands.

St. Ronans had given her a few directions, and then he drew his broad-brimmed hat over his eyes and tried to go to sleep; but after he had found his mouth full of weeds on the duck-island, and angry quacks close to his ear, and had had his head brought into painful contiguity with a branch, he got a little impatient, and requested to put to land; but Barbara begged so hard to remain, that he consented to moor the boat in the shade, and while he lay full length on the slope under the trees, the girls kept their seats and fed the swans with sweet cake, watched the kingfishers as they came to drink—tried to catch a dragonfly, dipped their hands in the water, and did all manner of childish things, and by-and-by they fell to telling each other stories. Nest told one first—a touching little episode of peasant life, that she had witnessed in her wanderings; it was sweet and pathetic, and it told like a strain of music. Nigel's came next—a legend of the Black Forest; and then it was Barbara's turn.

Barbara put it off as long as she could. "When I once begin, I never know where to stop," as she honestly remarked; but their persuasion overruled her, and so she commenced, and her face and her voice and her story combined made up such a study

that St. Ronans never took his eyes off her. "She would make her fortune on the stage, this oddity," he thought. "What unheard-of nonsense! and yet how well she tells it!"

But what it was all about nobody knew; I don't suppose Barbara did herself, for it had no beginning or end. It seemed to burst out somewhere in the middle, got rather crazy as it proceeded, and left off helplessly insane at the end. It presupposed so many remarkable things, and made so many false starts, which, like racers on a Derby-day, were brought up short, and got on such innumerably wrong scents, that it was quite a relief when the narrator paused from want of breath, in the midst of a most exciting scene, and drew down a violent curtain and a fit of coughing together. Barbara coughed and laughed till the tears ran down her face,—she was enjoying herself, there was no mistake; but St. Ronans never took his eyes off her.

"So you make your hero wear the armour of the middle ages, and drink the red wine through the helmet barred, and wear Fouché's best four-and-six-penny, all at the same time."

"Why, you see," returned Barbara, in the same relishing tone, "I am supposing a story of a hundred years hence."

"Then, why did you not say so? I wonder if you have any conception of the rubbish you have been

talking, Barbara, and for a whole hour, too. Nest, here, thinks you possessed."

"I thought it a very pretty story," returned Nest, innocently, "if I had only understood it; but why did not Mona marry the young knight? There was no reason why she should not, Barbara. Do go on—it is not half finished—and bring them together again."

Barbara moved restlessly. "I never finish my stories," she said.

"In the name of all that's enigmatical, why not?" and St. Ronans faced round in great astonishment.

"Or, if I did," returned Barbara, slowly, "I should never make my heroines happy."

"Worse and worse. I do believe you're nothing but a witch, Barbara; be quick and tell us why, or you will be flying away on your broomstick, with your hair out on end rather more than it is at present. What a crazy head it is!"

"If I gave them an end at all," she answered, indifferently, "I should make them die, or go into a nunnery, or do any possible or impossible thing, except marry and live happily ever after."

"What a bloodthirsty Barbara!—but why?"

"That's my affair," she returned, nodding her head provokingly. "There's nothing like a man for curiosity, after all: talk about women, they are mild in comparison. As for you, St. Ronans, you're as

bad as a judge and a jury put together, to say nothing of the learned gentleman in the wig who cross-examines the witnesses; and if there's one thing I hate," continued Bab, casting up her eyes virtuously, "it's being put into a moral witness-box."

"But surely Bab's master has a right to examine his pupil as much as he likes."

"Bab's master has a great many privileges, but I am not sure that is one of them."

"But only this one question, Barbara," he went on, coaxingly. There was importunity—nay, persistence—in his eyes. "Just tell me why you never make your heroine end happily? I confess I am curious, and shall be till you tell me."

"Oh, nonsense," said Barbara, sharply; "what a fuss you make about nothing, Nigel." She was a little nettled, or rather put to it, or she would never have given him his name. "Well, if you must pry into a little womanish weakness, know once for all, that Bab never likes her heroines to be happier than herself."

And the moment she had said it she was ready to shake herself with vexation.

"You're a downright idiot, that's what you are, Barbara: a pretty laughing-stock you have made of yourself by not being able to hold your tongue;" and then her face became a mass of sulky blushes.

"Are you not happy, then, Barbarina mia?"

There was a curious tone of triumph in Nigel's voice which roused all her opposition in a moment; but she was wily for once, and did not show it.

"I am glad there is but one Barbara Heathcote in the world," she said, with a little sigh.

"There can be but one," he returned, softly.

Barbara turned a deaf ear to him, and rushed on:—

"I think it a very good thing"—this in a tone of great decision. "Barbara is nothing better, after all, than a foolish, fretful child who cries for the moon, and if she got it to-morrow would only find it was made of green cheese. Pshaw! I have no patience with her;" and Barbara gave a great stamp with her foot, as though she meant it.

"I know a foolish, fretful child, whom I should like to have always near me, and whom I could make very, very happy, and myself, too. Do you know her, Barbara?"

It was a declaration of love, or at least it would have sounded so to any other woman; but there was something almost touching in Barbara's humility and self-depreciation: she neither understood, nor cared to understand, the implied meaning of his words; in her wildest dreams she would not have imagined it. That this man, with his beautiful face, could condescend to her—the doctor's daughter—to her, plain Barbara,—was a thing not to be lightly credited or easily entertained. Granted that his voice was unusually tender,

and his words full of affection, that did not help to enlighten her: she had always been used to a good deal of attention from St. Ronans; from the first he had placed her on the footing of a pupil and pet: while Barbara, on her part, had not been entirely free from a sort of innocent coquetry, as in the case of the two roses; but it had always been so childlike and so frankly expressed, that St. Rōnans must have been the vainest of men to rate it at anything but its true value; it was only the way she had of showing gratitude for small favors — shy utterances, as it were, from a loving but reticent nature.

Bab did not understand St. Ronans in the least; but she had a feeling that he was getting too much for her in more ways than one, so she got up and made him a curtsey. "Bab is much obliged to you, sir, for patting her so kindly on the head. To tell you the truth, she means well; but does not know how to manage it. That's English, is it not?"

"Sit down by me: I will teach you an Italian verb —'amore,' Barbarina mia—'amo.'"

Barbara executed a little dance and fairly stopped her ears. "Much obliged to you, St. Ronans; but I couldn't, really. My mother-tongue is quite good enough for the likes of me; and now, with your august permission, I will bid you good-by, as Nest is going to show me her room and all her pretty things."

"I could not hear of it," he returned, promptly.

"Come and sit down by me, Barbara; do you hear?" and he stretched out his hand as though to enforce obedience; but Barbara still danced before him, and out of his reach.

"Say, do you like the animated No? That's Cowper, Sir Nigel, he of the nightcaps and the hares, the mild and melancholy Cowper, who sang so sweetly of a sofa and the cup that cheers but not inebriates. I will translate the phrase genteely for you, shall I?" and Bab made him a low salaam—"I won't," and then scudded over the lawn, calling back, "St. Ronans, St. Ronans, is that an animated No?"

There was a hot sparkle in Nigel's eyes, and then he got up and walked down to the water, kicking a loose pebble before him. "You may laugh. Let them laugh that win, as I shall win one day, Barbara."

A mocking peal answered him. Barbara stood up on the terrace high above him, with her hands trumpeted together, and her voice sounding sweet and shrill in the distance, "St. Ronans, St. Ronans, is that an animated No?"

Barbara was delighted with Nest's room; its soft daintiness pleased her, and its fresh whites and pinks. It had such pure surroundings, such cosy couches, such Parian groups, niched hither and thither; but after awhile she grew discontented with it. It had no pictures, it was like the room of a child; but she

did not put her thoughts in words till afterwards, for just then Nest had unlocked a casket and placed it before her, and Barbara was gloating over the glittering heaps with coveting heart and the eyes of a miser. "It is well to be you, Nest, and not Barbara Heathcote." So had a few shining toys brought out the avarice of Bab's nature; and as she spoke she drew forth a wondrous serpent with ruby eyes and its own tail in its mouth, and slung it on her small, round arm, and then another and another, some with green and some with red stones, set cunningly in the bright yellow gold till it glittered all over with strange sparkles. "I always knew I was a Sybarite at heart," continued Barbara, honestly, "if I had only the chance of indulging my natural tastes; and who knows but the crumpled rose-leaf may hinder my slumbers yet? Why do you show me these?" she went on. "You are making me break the Tenth Commandment, and inciting me to envy."

"Not you, Barbara."

"Why not me?" she answered, in the same tone of mock distress. "I am not above these weaknesses, as you suppose. I like fine clothes and luxurious houses, and all the pomps and vanities of this so-called wicked world, which my catechism bids me renounce, and which I wouldn't, if I had the chance—not a bit of it. I should feel much happier if I could always hang these sparkling chains on me, and cover

my fingers knuckle-deep in diamonds. I should like them to flash as yours do whenever they move. Oh dear! oh dear! I wish I were a sultana!"

"Why, Bab?" said Nest, laughing. "Why, you foolish Bab, I do believe you are in earnest."

"Of course I am," she replied, nodding; and there was no mistaking the greed in her eyes. But I don't think we need judge her harshly for a weakness which she shared in common with other women since the days when the Damascene Steward wooed his master's intended bride with an "ear-ring and a bracelet of gold." I wonder how many women in the great Exhibition of 1862 failed to linger at those marvellous cases of incredible jewels, or preferred the beauties of the tinted Venus to those tiaras of green glory and necklets of shimmering brilliants. I dare say many bright eyes sparkled over those hoarded treasures which other works of art failed to charm; but—"comment voulez-vous?"—is not human nature faulty in the extreme? It is only a lesser example of Bunyan's muckrake after all.

Nest Strath knew very little about human nature; so she was filled with surprise at Bab's honest avowal. To tell you the truth, it rather disappointed her. She wanted her friend to be as indifferent to all these things as she was herself. She drew a long face. "You, of all people, to care for such trifles as these!" and she pushed them contemptuously from her.

"Trifles! they are splendid realities. Are you not proud of them, Nest?"

"I? I hate them. No, it is wrong to say that; but I would never wear one again if I could help it. I used to feel the veriest slave that ever was when I put them on; their weight and brilliancy oppressed me. I used to envy your grey dress, Barbara; but you never look like a little nun now."

Barbara mutely pointed to her grey folds.

"Yes, I know: but the plainness and simplicity of it is gone. It is soft, but not sombre, with the blue ribbon and those rich carnations tucked in your belt. You are not vain, Barbara—not really, I believe; but you have learnt how to dress yourself. Your colors are always harmonious and well chosen; but, somehow, I liked you best as you were."

Barbara began to pout. "You are very disagreeable, Nest. Never mind my dress, I have but one silk in the world. Hester is so stingy; but what is the good of all these pretty things if you won't put them on?"

"To deck Nigel's wife." What made Barbara flush up at that? "I shall never wear anything but my pearls again—my pearls with the tiny diamond cross. I am fond of my white shining cross; the rest shall all go to the woman that Nie loves, I have made up my mind to that. Jewels and deformity ought never to go together."

"You are a monomaniac on that point, Nest. I wish you would not misname a little crookedness."

"A little crookedness, Barbara? Come, let us lock up these glittering things; they are nothing but a false dazzle after all. I won't say you have fallen in my estimation by admiring them too much; but I do wish, oh! I do wish that you were above this weakness."

"Do you? Then I am very glad I expressed myself so openly, for anything is better than sailing under false colors and being thought better than you really are. Always make the worst of yourself, is my advice, and then no one is disappointed."

Barbara said this with a little toss and in a tone so much resembling the "come on" of a pugilistic street boy, that Nest hastened to kiss away her words, and begged her to forget them; "for if my mind be as narrow as my chest," she said, "and bent at all in a wrong direction, it won't do to influence a great healthy mind like yours," and her long hair swept over Barbara as she leant her cheek against hers.

Barbara returned her caresses in a rough hasty way. "You are an angel, that's what you are, Nest; and I, Heaven forgive me, am a wicked little woman: and why have you got pink walls and Parian children with bare legs in those funny little niches, and no pictures?"

"I have one, I will show it to you presently," and Nest pointed, reverently, to a curtain dropped down

before a carved prie-Dieu. "I have quaint notions of my own, *cara mia*—one of my fancies is that I care to have no picture but one in my sleeping-room."

"And that is——"

"The picture of the Crucified."

Barbara shuffled her feet and looked uncomfortable.

"You have got it behind that curtain there?"

Nest nodded assent.

"Well, why do you hide it?"

"I don't hide it, Barbara; I only shroud it up from careless eyes: you may go and look at it if you like."

Barbara did so and returned.

"Well?"

"Well, it is very beautiful; no one would look at that carelessly."

"I have another reason," said Nest, in a low voice, "I am alone in my opinion, but what of that? I cannot bear that subject being made too public, it is too sacred, too heart-rending, too terrible to be looked at except for purposes of devotion; when my thoughts are cold and wandering, and I cannot pray, I like to look up at it, and it recalls me in a moment; that is how the Roman Catholics, aye, and the Anglican Catholics, use their crucifixes. I do not often uncover it, I cannot; the expression of the physical torture, the strained disjointed limbs, the crowned helpless head, is too much for me: my only wonder is how any one can

look at it with indifference and pass on, as I have seen them over and over again."

"You are peculiar in your opinions, you know." Barbara thought she was expected to say something, so this was the sole remark that fell from her; Nest found it a little chilling, as she often did find Barbara's responses, so she said, quietly, that they must leave off talking and begin to dress, a proposition which restored Bab to good humor, for she had been a little ruffled over the splendors of the trinkets.

"Behold my nun of the robe *grise*," said Nest, with a little mocking laugh, as Bab escaped from her adorning hands. She ran and looked at herself, and clapped her hands with quite a shout of glee.

"Why, I look fit to go to a ball, Nest! why, Nest, what have you done?"

Barbara might well exclaim at the radiant little figure that answered back her smiles in the great pier-glass; she had it is true only got on the white dress that Hester had so thoughtfully sent after her, but Nest had wreathed her hair with maiden-hair fern and rose-colored geranium, and had fixed a great spray of the same as a breast-knot; the natural green comb set off Barbara's brown hair and glowing healthy skin, and excitement had a little heightened her color. St. Ronans stared not a little as she entered the drawing-room—this dainty lady was new to him; Barbara did not see his look for the square shoulders of

Norman Strath blocked up one window, and she had eyes for no one else; he turned round and greeted her with a well-pleased smile: "Have you had a happy day, Barbara?"

"Very, very happy," replied Barbara, with unmistakable emphasis; and then she proceeded to detail all the several pleasures she had enjoyed; the summons to the dinner-table interrupted her, but she had it her own way for a while.

But whether she talked, or whether she was silent, it was all alike novel and delightful. Hester was a careful housekeeper; though the board at Heathcote was abundantly provided, it was all of a plain homely kind. Barbara had never seen or tasted such delicacies as the small round table furnished—such entremets, such amber jellies, such candied fruits; and then the ferns, and the glitter, and the glass, and the strange sparkling wine drank out of those quaint old Venetian glasses. Nest, in her shimmering blue dress and long fair hair, making such a sweet little hostess, and St. Ronans so graceful and talkative. No wonder Bab's eyes got brilliant with excitement, no wonder she laughed and grew silent in a breath; no wonder Norman looked so cheerful, and told such racy anecdotes; it was the pleasantest dinner-table in the world. They got on politics presently, that debatable ground of all ages, and all dinner-time Nigel and Norman were at it tooth and nail; there was no shadow of reason for

Bab to interfere, she might have held her peace and said nothing, for men like women listeners—I am not quite sure that they don't like them better than women talkers—but Bab was not going to be sensible, so she floundered among them in a moment, with as much grace and dexterity as I have seen the female sea-lion at the Zoological Gardens, when she walked on her fins and her tail, and overset all the flower-pots in the midst of her clammy progress. Of course she said everything wrong, and in the worst possible manner; but what did that matter, when she wore a comb of maiden-hair fern and looked almost pretty? neither of them quarrelled with her as when her hair was rough, so she played the political Spilikins with them and hooked up a king and a queen in a knowing manner before she left off.

Barbara has contradicted every one, and herself, too, twenty times over, and Barbara is radiant. "Mesdames and you, my bon cousin, let us consider the discussion ended, and adjourn to the terrace." And then they all went out.

They sat down after a while, and Nest ordered coffee.

It was a delicious evening; the lights from the open windows threw a gleam over the little party, and enabled them to see each other's faces, for outside there was only dim starlight, dark masses of foliage, and pale shadows on the lawn.

Barbara quoted poetry softly to Nest, the young men chatted together, and by-and-by there was a lull. Dr. Strath puffed slowly at the cigarette Nigel had handed him.

"I saw Geoffrey Hunsden this evening, Barbara; he has been spending the afternoon at your house." Barbara gave a shrug, Nigel laughed.

"Poor old Geoff! I hope that match will never come off."

"I don't know one more likely; they say matches are made in heaven: what's your objection to this one?"

"On the ground of mutual disparity of taste. Barbara knows my ideas on that subject. Hester will bore him to death."

"Humph, it is his own affair, I take it."

"Not a bit of it," returned the other, briskly, "he's talked into it by his mother, and then he is in the clutches of a woman who is as strong-minded and determined as she is beautiful; it is suicidal on her part, but women are suicidal on principle. Geoff is the gentlest fellow breathing, but three years of matrimony with the grey mare, and there'll be a coroner's inquest up at the Park—Hunsden Field, they ought to call it, rotten old place that it is—and they 'll bring in a verdict and true bill of the case, 'Droved and hobby-horsed to death.'" They all laughed, and then Norman said:

"I don't see why you should pity Hunsden. A man is his own master, I suppose."

"Not when he lets himself be led in a leash like a greyhound, and that's what Geoffrey does. He's managed by a parcel of women, and the young women are worse than the old ones. When they take to managing a fellow, if he's soft, like my friend Geoffrey here, they do it with a twirl of their little finger. Hester is not particularly skilful in the matter, so she hammers it home; but I should not be surprised if he turned out a rusty nail in the end."

"You are a bit of a philosopher, Nigel," said his cousin.

"I know human nature, Dr. Strath, and that is what you professional men don't always know; and I tell you this—we are among friends, I suppose—I am a nice observer, and from what I could see—and I saw a good deal more than people supposed—he's getting sick of the whole business."

Barbara caught her breath in a startled manner.

"You may be surprised, Barbara, but there, you're only a girl. Girls don't know anything about this sort of thing. I dare not trust you; but if any one —Norman, for example, might give her a friendly hint to amuse him a little more, and bore him a little less, or else—mark my words—he'll break loose from his traces one of these days."

"Let him," returned Barbara, proudly. "No one

wants him to marry Hester, he is not worth her little finger; he is nothing but a great, good-natured ninny."

"Softly, softly, my dear child," interposed Norman, gravely. "I don't think that is quite the way to speak of your future brother-in-law."

"He'll never be that," she said, crossly.

"We're getting on odd topics to-night," said Dr. Strath. "Little Barbara, you are too sure about everything, and so is Nigel, too. See how big he was just now with his prognostications of evil."

"And they will be true, mark my words," repeated Nigel, sententiously.

"Well, well, we shall see. Dr. Heathcote was at the gate with him as I passed, and they told me two bits of news. By the bye, the doctor said I was to take you home early, Barbara."

"Daddie may keep his advice to himself. I never catch cold. What else, Norman?"

"Oh! a message to you, Nest. Geoffrey will send up the white pony he promised you to-morrow. He says you need not be afraid to try her, for she is as gentle as a lamb."

"He's a generous fellow. Nest is so timorous about horses; we have not one she dare ride."

"I only ride in the country," said Nest, *sotto voce*.

"Oh! every one knows that, *ma mie*. Well, I must say it is a good-natured action on Geoffrey's

part, and a very handsome gift into the bargain. He is a regular old English squire—open-handed—always ready to give. Why, it was only the other day he sent you that beautiful little Italian grey-hound."

"He is very kind," murmured Nest.

"But you haven't seen him half a dozen times."

"Oh yes, Nie!"

"Well, not often."

"Perhaps not," she answered, quietly. "He walks to church with us every Sunday, and I have seen him two or three times a week at Heathcote House, and he dined here once when you were ill."

"Whatever was that for?"

"Oh! didn't you know? I thought mamma told you; perhaps you have forgotten. Lady Hunsden sent us home in her carriage one wet Sunday, and Sir Geoffrey called afterwards with the dog, and mamma asked him to dine, because she was so dull of an evening without you, she said."

"Ah! I think I do remember hearing something about it. Fancy the *madre* and Geoffrey *tête-à-tête*. How hard up she must have been."

"Well, as none of you seem anxious to hear my news I will shut up, as Leigh says, and take my departure. Barbara, it is really getting late, and they will expect you home. I should not be sur-

prised if you were to find Geoffrey Hunsden there now."

"Oh no! he never pays two visits on one day," replied Bab, confidently; "but I shan't move an inch, Norman, till you've told us what you've got to say. It is something grave, I see."

"Dr. Heathcote said I might tell, but I did not like to spoil your evening. Well, come down this shrubbery walk, Barbara," he continued, in a lower tone; but Nigel overheard him.

"No, no—no private confidences; no shrubbery paths; we are all to hear as well as Barbara. Out with it, Norman."

"My good fellow, it concerns Barbara more than it does the rest; but as I don't think she will be much surprised, I may as well be quick about it, and tell you that Hester and Geoffrey have made it up between them, and Hester is to be Lady Hunsden before next spring."

It was impossible for Nigel not to look crestfallen. He had to swallow his philosophy as best he could, and a long whistle of intense surprise was all his reply.

Barbara said, "Why did you not tell me before, Norman? I have got a blow," and she gasped as if she did not like it; and then, "It is all over with Essie, and she will marry and be unhappy ever after. It is a crazy, crazy world, St. Ronans," and then sat down.

"It is a world that marries and gives in marriage," my child," returned Dr. Strath, kindly. "I don't see that you have anything to fear for your sister. Geoffrey Hunsden is a good man."

Barbara's answer surprised them all—it was a very frank burst of tears.

CHAPTER IV.

BARBARA FORBIDS THE BANNS.

"How hard it is for women to keep counsel!"
Shakspeare.

THAT broke up the party.

Nigel leaned over her in a frightened sort of way, but Bab gave him a little push.

"When a person is rather overset and does a silly thing," said Bab, with hysterical dignity, "there is no reason why they should be suffocated," and then she gave a titter, "dear, oh dear, it is the maddest, most ridiculous old world that ever was—as mad as a March hare; and it has been such a happy day. Oh! please, take me home, somebody; for where's the good of anything?"

"Let me take you home, Barbarina," whispered St. Ronans, coaxingly; but Dr. Strath quietly put him aside. "Come, Barbara;" he said, and before she quite knew what he wanted she was standing under the chandelier in the drawing-room, and he was tying on her bonnet, which Nest had brought. "There," he continued, in much the same tone he

might have employed to a fretful infant. "I think you are tidy now; never mind gloves in the country. Come along."

"What makes you in such a hurry?" replied Barbara, rather contradictiously. "There will be creases under my chin to-morrow. Good bye. We shall never know such a happy day again." Nest shivered. "That will do, St. Ronans, you hurt me," and she withdrew her hand crossly from his grasp.

"Nothing pleases you to-night, Barbara," said Dr. Strath, smiling. "Not even to take my arm, I suppose." Bab took it without a word. They were in the fragrant, dark lanes now. She would have liked to have put her head down on it and have her cry out. I wish she had. Ah! I wish she had.

Dr. Strath went on talking. He said a great many soothing things in a very kind voice. Bab listened to them all, and then at the last she said, "It is no use talking, there is only one thing I care to know, after all. Does Geoffrey Hunsden love Hester, or does he not?"

Dr. Strath was silent.

"Silence gives consent. Do you mean yes, Norman?"

He gave an uneasy laugh. "Suppose you ask Geoffrey that question, and not me."

"As if I don't know what that means," said Bab, contemptuously. "Of course he doesn't. I have seen it twenty times over. He thinks her a fine

woman, and fit to head his table, that's all; and do you imagine Hester loves him?"

"My dear Barbara, that is your sister's affair."

She gave a stamp. "I tell you no, most emphatically no. She is as sweet as sugar to him, and as cold as ice. And what she's marrying him for nobody knows; but it is a wicked shame to let her do it, that's what it is."

"Barbara, do you know what you are saying?" There was a grave reproof in his voice.

"Don't be angry with me, Norman. I can't keep it all in: I am going to be very good presently."

"But you will make Hester very unhappy, now everything is settled."

"I—I shall never say a word to her, or to Geoffrey either."

"Come, that is right," he returned, in a tone of relief. "Well, have it out, it won't hurt me, or the hedges, to hear you."

"No, I don't feel like saying anything more now at present. I have always quarrelled with Essie all my life long. We never get on a bit, and never shall; but I don't like feeling ashamed of her."

"You are putting it mildly, Barbara, upon my word."

"I am ashamed of her," repeated Barbara, slowly, "disappointed and sorry and ashamed. It is not honest to marry a man you don't really love; it is

very little better than telling a lie. It is that that hurts me so."

What was Dr. Strath's answer to that?—"Ah! if only all were as good and brave as you."

"As me, Norman!" in an incredulous tone.

"Aye, as you, my child. You are faithful and true to your heart's core, Barbara." In after years she remembered those words. They parted at the little green gate in the wall. As it swung back there was a sweet smell of lilies in the air. The garden was dark and perfumy. A few stars shone overhead, and a great moth dashed against Barbara, leaving a trail of dew on her cheek.

Her wistful eyes spoke volumes; but she only said "Good night."

"Good night," he returned. "You will be very good, Barbara?"

"Yes, if I can," she replied, sighing. "When one is happy it is easy enough, but not now."

Barbara was very near forgetting her promise. When she opened the parlor door the old twinge came back again, and yet any stranger would have called it a very pleasant family party. There was a scent of fresh flowers, a space of soft shaded light; somewhere in the dusk by the open windows Connie was playing low snatches of music, a waltz or two—a prelude to a song; Leigh was asleep on the sofa; the doctor reading in his great chair; Hester working

Barbara remained silent, she felt hot, and she wanted to hold up her heavy dress, it was trailing in the dust, but she did not dare attract his attention, so she kept her eyes fixed on the dim grey hedgerows, which a little time ago had been so fresh and clean, and hoped he would leave her in peace. But some hopes are fruitless.

"I have been thinking a great deal over that talk we had, Barbara." He looked full at her, so she was driven to unlock her lips.

"What talk?" she asked, rather ungraciously.

"About the harmony of our relations with our poorer neighbours, and the best means of attaining a wider influence over them; I remember every word you said on the subject, Barbara."

"Do you?" she answered; how intent she was on those hedgerows, there were some bits of straw sticking out of a blackberry-bush, and two sparrows were chirping and pecking at them.

"Your words were so perfectly just and true, they were clever, too, for a girl of your age: let me see, ladies were to mix with them, not tower above them, they were to impart to them some of the simple and cheaper elegancies of life, they were to be encouraged to make their homes pretty as well as neat, their dress was to be becoming, not slovenly, fresh, and whole, and clean, and the special lady visitor who was to take the special cottage under her ministering guardianship was

to teach them refinement and grace in her own person by living example, for 'cleanliness is next to—'"

"Good-bye—good-bye," said Barbara, hastily, and before he had divined her purpose, she was down a side lane, sweeping cart-loads of dust in her train; she could hear him laugh, yes, she was sure she could hear him laugh. "If I am ever such a goose again," cried Barbara. "Oh how hot and heavy it is!"

She was on the brow of Bex Hill by this time, there was the Blue Boar with its creaking sign-board, and opposite it, the smithy, the sparks were flying off the anvil as she passed; "a blacksmith is all very well in winter time," thought Barbara, "but I should like to change trades with the season, be a haymaker one part of the year and a reaper another. Dear—oh dear; and a district visitor never; whatever shall I say?" and then she lifted the latch of a little white gate, and tapped softly at a door, a voice cried "come in," and Barbara and the old brown dress went in, and then she felt helpless.

It was a small room, rather untidy at the present moment, and a young sickly-looking woman sat by the hearth, with a battered old pail beside her, trying to wash a solemn fat boy who stood beside, bare-footed, in his stays, while two other children, similarly equipped, played with some tin soldiers in a corner. "Twelve o'clock in the day and not washed," was Barbara's comment, and she began to feel virtuous and like Miss Vokes. She went forward with an air.

"You are Mrs. Jackson, I believe, your husband works with Sam Tyler, the blacksmith; well, you don't know me—I am Dr. Heathcote's daughter," and Bab seated herself on the edge of a chair and unpinned her shawl.

"Dr. Heathcote's daughter, Miss!" and Bab saw the woman look her over in undisguised amazement. "If I may make so bold, you are never his eldest daughter, Miss Hester?"

"No, I am the second one—Barbara."

"Oh! that people call the clever Miss Heathcote. I have heard the doctor talk about you, Miss," which piece of intelligence somewhat astonished Barbara. "I suppose they call Hester the handsome Miss Heathcote—I wonder what Connie is." The woman seemed to guess her thoughts, she was a poor sickly-looking body with strained bright eyes—"Handsome is as handsome does, Miss."

"Yes," said Barbara; "and why is that boy so dirty?" there was no analogy whatever, but she wished to make it appear that there was. "It is twelve o'clock," said Barbara, virtuously, "and the children are in their stays, and not washed, Mrs. Jackson—'cleanliness is next to —'"

But Mrs. Jackson put her apron up to her eyes, and Barbara became remorseful.

"No one never complained of me when I was well, Miss; the children were as sweet and clean as a nut,

and my master, he had his bit of dumpling or 'taters as ready as ready could be before this, but being took sick as I am, with fourteen children, and six of them dead and buried till the resurrection, it's hard lines, and I not able to rinse out a pinny for them."

Tears streamed down the hard furrowed face—Bab coughed a little sympathy. "Are you very ill, Mrs. Jackson?" she asked, with real feeling in her voice.

"'Deed and I am, Miss; I have got an internal tumor, the doctor tells me, many a better woman nor myself have pined of that, and died; and but for my master and the little ones, I wouldn't care, but who would mind them when I am gone?"

Barbara began to feel melancholy; here was an aspect of human misery presented to her, without any means of relieving it. "It is a howling wilderness," thought Bab, and she coughed again; coughing always relieved her. "We must all die one day," she said solemnly, and after that effort she turned her attention to the boy, who seemed to pass his time in trying to scramble up into his mother's lap and being mildly put down again.

"He's heavy, and he worrits," said the poor mother.

"What's his name," asked Barbara, with languid dignity.

"Dan, Miss; but he calls himself Baby."

"Babby," rapidly enunciated the child, with another fretful climb and a roll.

"Let him come and sit on my lap," said Bab, timidly; and at the invitation he hoisted himself up, his small coal-begrimed feet appearing first, and then his curly head. Once seated in the lap of his desires he began to be communicative, if not brilliant, and commenced conversation by profuse alterations in the pronunciation of his name, for it seemed to change the vowels rapidly. It was not "Babby," it was "Bebe," then "Bibbie," presently "Babbie," lastly "Bubbie;" he stuck at Bubbie for a long while and seemed to like it rather. Bab was delighted with him; he was dirty, but he filled both arms and hindered conversation; she had hopes that her visit would be triumphant after all, till he fell asleep, and Mrs. Jackson asked her to read to her, and then all Barbara's embarrassment returned.

"There was a young lady, Miss, as used to come and see me, her name was Miss Shepherd, and she did read beautiful," hinted Mrs. Jackson; "and when she finished the chapter she used to say, 'Now, Mrs. Jackson, let us draw an inference,' she said, and sometimes she drawed it just beautiful."

"An inference?" said Bab in perplexity.

"Yes, an inference; sometimes a prayer, a precept and a promise, all bonded together—strings of

pearls she called them—'My pearls, Mrs. Jackson, and then she would put up a prayer."

"What sort of prayers?" asked Barbara, willing to prolong the conversation.

"Oh, Church prayers sometimes, one or two collectives, but mostly she stemporised. Oh, she stemporised lovely to be sure. Ah, poor thing, she didn't last long, I see'd her before she died, poor lamb, she said to me, 'I am going to worship in another temple, Mrs. Jackson,' says she, 'and we'll meet maybe in the courts of the Gentiles.' She was always talking about the Jews was Miss Shepherd."

"What did she die of?" asked Barbara, somewhat awestruck.

"Indigestion of the lungs, my dear young lady."

Barbara took refuge in her book.

She got on nicely after that and read Balaam's history all through, in a loud cheerful voice, which she thought was as good as large print to failing eyes. It woke Baby, as he plaintively remarked, "Oo woke Bobbie dear;" and it rather tried Mrs. Jackson; and afterwards, though with painful utterance and bashfulness, Barbara "put up a prayer," just picked out a collect or two, and then she jerked into her seat again, feeling she had done her duty.

"I must go now," she said sweetly, as she drew on the thread gloves.

"Yes, indeed, Miss, thank you kindly, and my duty to the Doctor."

"I don't think Miss Vokes could have done it better," she thought as she retraced her steps; "but I fear I've made a mistake with my brown dress."

CHAPTER V.

AT ODDS.

"A face that should content me wondrous well,
Should not be fair, but lovely to behold,
With gladsome cheer, all grief for to expel;
With sober looks, so would I that it should
Speak without words, such words as none can tell."

Sir T. Wyatt.

"A woman is more considerate in affairs of love than a man; because love is more the study and business of her life."

Washington Irving.

EVERY one agreed that the dinner-party at Hunsden Park passed off very fairly; there were no strangers invited, and the only friends present were Doctor and Mrs. Strath; Geoffrey, it is true, made some slight effort to include the St. Ronans' people, but his mother had the good sense to strenuously oppose this plan. "We owe it to Hester, Geoffrey, to make it strictly a family party; you must remember her position, my dear, and your own too;" and though Sir Geoffrey was a little sulky he was obliged to give in, and so every one agreed the evening was a success, Connie especially, who had a new

dress for the occasion, and had never been at a dinner-party in her life before.

Barbara alone was silent. "The world is madder than I thought it," she muttered to herself when the Park gates had closed upon them; "there are some few people in it that ought to be shut up in Bedlam—our worthy host for example;" and then she and the stars had a long confab together. For Barbara had noticed a great many things, her bright eyes had peered out of a corner half the evening, where she had sat hidden like a hunted mouse, and when spoken to by Norman or Leigh her manner had seemed a little ruffled. "Why can't a person be left alone occasionally?" she had remarked rather peevishly to the latter, when he essayed some lively speech; "I am doing a difficult sum," she afterwards volunteered to Norman; "mine is a good head for arithmetic, I am trying to subtract a greater number from a less, and there is no remainder, plus nothing, Norman, not even a fraction, so I must rub it out and commence afresh. I will begin with nought one this time and carry nothing—not even brains."

And Norman said, "Let me feel your pulse, Barbara, for I think you must be a little feverish."

"As mad as a March hare," replied she frankly; "I can recommend you a patient for a strait-waistcoat, Dr. Strath. How flippant Leigh is to-night,

very flippant; his jokes are not good, but he looks handsome, and good looks weigh heavier than cleverness; do you know my favourite song, Norman, 'The Maniac?' It is a horrible song and used to frighten me; Connie must sing it, she hasn't at all a good voice, and can't sing that song in particular. Connie, will you sing 'The Maniac,' for Dr. Strath?"

Connie came up in a rose-coloured flutter with white shining shoulders, she shrugged one daintily at Barbara.

"I am going to sing 'The Wanderer;' you are so fond of that, Bab."

"If you don't sing 'The Maniac' I won't hear any other; go away. 'I see her dancing in the halls.' Oh, it makes your flesh creep. I don't know whether I like that or the 'Last Man' best. Fancy being the last man, Norman—so cheerful, you know. I wonder if he had a dog—Tobias had a dog." She seemed inclined to continue, but remained silent and meditative, and then she went over to Geoffrey.

Sir Geoffrey had not seemed quite himself this evening, he made a capital host in general, frank, hospitable and chatty in his heavy way; but to-night he looked harassed, a little distrait—what St. Ronans would have termed "bored."

He was bored, there was no doubt of that. Hester sat beside him all the evening, looking beautiful in

her fresh crisp silk. She was a little pale—a little silent, but so gracious, she seemed to unbend her dignity every time she spoke to him, never had she been so benignant and condescending. She was his for life, this grand-looking woman, this fair-haired Hester, with her smooth tongue and her pleasant ways; he had honestly wooed her after his lights, but his winnings seemed tedious to him. She would sit opposite to him day after day in graceful raiment—he knew that now, but what was he to say to her? She would take his mother's place—this homely woman's place whom he had so loved and reverenced, and rule his house—she would be his wife, to whom he was to cleave, his very thoughts were hers, but yet how was he to speak to her of the things that lay nearest his heart? She had called his sports trivial, she would weary him with her charities, her endless dictums, and loving lectures. In spite of her beauty, which to do him justice had once attracted him, he had learnt to fear more than to love her; but for his sense of honor, which was ruggedly strong, and his fear of disappointing his mother, he would have said to her, "Hester, our agreement was a mistake, a man cannot answer for himself for years, it is all wrong, we do not love each other."

I think such a noble frankness would have won her esteem, a passing humiliation, and there they would have been friends for life; but he never got

himself to say this, and at length his coolness and indifference began to alarm his mother. She had a long talk with Hester, and induced her to yield up her part of the compact. After all, what was there to wait for? She was eight-and-twenty, and her life was dull to her. She liked him better now. So one day Geoffrey found his long wooing over, the prize was ready for his hand, there was nothing to do but to take it. And so it came to pass that something that was very like hope—something that lay in a secret corner in the man's heart, like a healing lily leaf—withered and shrank away from that moment. Barbara saw the brooding sadness on his face, and was sorry for him.—"If I could help you, Geoff, I would," she said to herself, "for you've always been good-natured to Barbara. I think I'll bring in a bill of lunacy against you—did it when of unsound mind. I wish Hester wouldn't look so like an image. Her head nods at intervals like my Mandarin, and a stereotyped smile," added Bab, with increasing irritation, "is an abomination," and then she got herself into a corner by Geoffrey. Geoffrey looked very pleased to see her. He liked Barbara —all the men did, only she did not know it, and sometimes they did not themselves. "Bab Heathcote's no beauty, but she's bright," was often said of her; but women did not get on with Barbara at all. Geoffrey was pleased to see her, and made room for

her with much cunning. "My mother's beckoning to you, Hester," he said, and then he and Bab had it all to themselves.

"Geoffrey, you don't look a bit happy. Bridegrooms elect ought to be happy. You are making a mistake, you are not going to be hung."

"I feel precious like it," was his inward comment. "How ought a fellow to look?" he said aloud.

"I never was in the position," answered Barbara, confidentially. "But between you and me, Geoffrey, I think they ought to look cheerful, which you don't. By-the-bye, I expected to see Nest here to-night."

It was a daring shot, but it hit. Geoffrey's face got burning, like a girl's—only a man's blushes are not so becoming.

"I was up at St. Ronans yesterday," he remarked, in a shamefaced manner. "Miss Strath wanted to try her pony, and her mother asked me to be there. We had quite a long ride together."

"Oh!" said Barbara; but she waited for him to go on.

"I don't think she much liked my riding with her at first. She's sensitive about her figure, poor little thing; but with her long hair no one would notice it. She got on capitally, though Bolt was a bit fiery."

"She is dreadfully morbid," returned Barbara,

meditatively. "Her mother has made her so, I believe. She thinks herself worse than she really is."

"Yes, that is just it," answered Geoffrey, with animation. "She is slightly deformed, of course. No man in his senses would deny that; but who would notice it with her face?"

"With her face, Geoffrey! Why, she is rather plain, is she not?—at least everybody says so."

"Plain! not a bit of it. The thing is, when one is with her one never thinks what she is."

"That's rather vague, isn't it?" observed Barbara, with assumed simplicity.

"Vague, is it? Well, I don't know. She often reminds me, when I look at her in church, of one of those saints one sees in the picture books. She is a saint I believe, only her goodness is not of the heavy sort. I can't fancy her lecturing a man now. Can you?"

"No. I don't think Nest 's much of a virago," replied Barbara, and then she laughed heartily; but Geoffrey did not join her.

"And she likes horses?"

"Humph!" observed Barbara, gravely debating the question. "Yes, I believe she does."

"And dogs?" he hazarded, more timidly.

Barbara brought this question also to the test of memory, and then nodded ungraciously.

"And she is sensible, 'pon honor. She does not

think a man wastes his time who is fond of shooting and hunting and all that sort of thing. I have heard her say so over and over again."

A sudden gleam shot out of Barbara's eyes.

"That is a pretty thing Connie is singing. What a cracked voice the child has! I wish it were 'The Maniac' though, that's a fine song—'I see her dancing in the hall, I see her, I see her,'" and she hummed a snatch and broke off.

"Nest would not dance," observed Geoffrey, gravely, "and with her figure one would not ask her. The saints didn't dance, did they, Barbara?"

Bab turned a little cross. "We've left off talking about Nest long ago, Geoffrey."

"Oh! Have we?" returned Geoffrey, helplessly, and then he fidgeted. "I thought you were fond of your friend, Barbara?"

"Well, so I am," she returned, in an aggravated voice. "Dear, how tiresome you are, Geoffrey, and so provoking. Of course, she's just the dearest little creature in the world, and all that, and looks nicer than Ruth Canham with all her beauty: and if I were to choose Leigh a wife to-morrow, I should fix on her, only Leigh wouldn't like a crooked wife."

"What's that you are talking about?" said Leigh, striding towards them with a frightened air.

"Oh, nothing," answered Barbara, readily. "You

are very flippant this evening, dear—terribly flippant. I must take you in hand presently."

"And find me a good wife, I suppose?" he returned, with a meaning sneer.

"Yes, if you've not fixed on one already," laughed Barbara. "Ah! ah!" and she laughed till the tears ran down her face. It was such a capital joke, only no one seemed to see it.

Leigh's face darkened and then grew dreadfully pale. "Take care what you are about, Barbara," he said, angrily. Then, cooling down but with much haughtiness, "Your tongue will bring you into trouble if you make me and my affairs the subject of conversation with your friends," and he turned away and walked to the window.

Barbara was quite stunned. "What does he mean?" she cried, in a frightened tone. "What have I said, Geoffrey, to make him go off like that?"

"He is in one of his tantrums, I suppose," answered Geoffrey. He was a little amused, but he stuck his hands in his waistcoat in a puzzled way. Bab turned from him with a gesture of impatience.

"Why, Leigh, you foolish Leigh!" she called out cheerfully, "come here to Barbara, sir."

But he did not come. So she followed him. "Why, Gyp," she said, very piteously, "you're never cross with Dame Muffet." They were standing together outside the open window now, the cool night

air blew upon their faces. He looked very pale still, very unlike Leigh Heathcote; but soon he seemed to recover himself.

"What was that you were telling Geoffrey about to-morrow, Barbara?" and his tone was so fierce that she shrank from him.

"About to-morrow?" she returned, in a bewildered voice.

"Aye," he repeated, impatiently, "something about a wife and to-morrow. Who were you talking about, Barbara?"

She burst into a laugh. "Why, about Nest. Oh, you foolish fellow! I only said you would not like a crooked wife."

"Pshaw! what nonsense. Was that all?" but his tone was full of relief.

"Of course it was. Whom did you think I meant, dear? It was only a silly jest of mine to silence Geoffrey, he was so stupid."

"True, what an ass I've been; there, don't think any more about it, Barbara."

"And you are not angry with me, Gyp—you are sure you are not angry?"

"Nonsense," he repeated again—but this time with a relenting kiss. "There, run away, Barbara, or Geoffrey will think we are mad."

So Barbara went back into her corner, but she felt spiritless and uncomfortable; she was tired, too, and

it was quite a relief when Hester made the signal for a move. Leigh was not with them when they walked home, he was smoking a cigar with Geoffrey; but while Barbara was sitting up in her window seat, having her confab with the stars, she heard his whistle at the foot of the stairs, and flew to open the door.

"Oh, is that you, Leigh?—have you come to wish me good night?"

"Yes—no; I can't stay, Barbara, I only wanted to say good bye, because I shall be off early in the morning."

"Early in the morning!—why, not before I am down, surely?"

"Yes, hours before. Rolf and I are going to have a day's fishing. Why I told you a week ago, Bab; we take the train to Crowley, and then walk on to Englemere."

"But the fishing is not near so good at Englemere as at Lynn Hollow, Leigh; Norman said so, and so did——"

"Well, never mind what Norman says," returned Leigh, impatiently. "Dr. Strath is not everybody's oracle, though you seem to think so; well, good bye. What shall you do with yourself to-morrow, Bab? Go to St. Ronans, as usual?"

"Yes; and in the afternoon I shall walk over to Dort's Mill."

"Dort's Mill!" said Leigh, in a startled way, "you are never going there to-morrow, Barbara."

"Why not—I have not been there for an age, have I?"

"But it is so hot," he stammered; "so hot and so dusty; better wait a day or two till the weather is cooler."

"Oh, nonsense," said Barbara, "what rubbish you talk, Leigh—as if I cared whether the day is hot or not!"

"But you ought to care," he returned, peremptorily; "it is very bad for your health, and your complexion, too," but seeing Bab's derisive smile he stopped.

"Have you got any more objections?" she asked, merrily.

"Some one told me," he continued, hesitating, "that is—I think—I heard—was it Rolf?—yes, it must have been Rolf—that Ruth—Miss Canham, I mean, was going out for a day's holiday."

"Oh, that's different," observed Barbara, quickly. "Why did you not tell me so before?"

"Well, I tell you now; so good night."

"Good night, Leigh." She kissed him and was turning away, but he stopped her.

"I am sorry I was cross to you this evening, Bab."

"So am I, Gyp, but never mind."

"Oh, but I do; you are such a dear little soul;

you know, Barbara, that I would not hurt you for the world." There was a break in his voice that made her look up, and then she saw there were tears in his eyes; tears in Gypsey Leigh's eyes!

"Oh, Leigh, my darling!" and Bab clung to him.

"Good night, Bab; there, don't strangle me. Gyp's a sad fellow, but he'll never grieve Babchen again if he can help it—never again."

The next afternoon Bab started for a walk. She set out for the fir plantations, as usual, but as soon as she caught sight of their green gloom, she turned her back on them, and went as fast as her hoppity trot would carry her, straight to Dort's Mill. She had argued herself round to this contrary proceeding in a way peculiar to herself, till she had satisfactorily adduced three very good reasons for so doing. They were very good reasons—quite admirable. Reason the first—it was a very hot day, an intensely hot day—scorching and shadeless, therefore a walk through the white dusty roads would be pleasant, to say the least of it; secondly, Leigh had pronounced on hearsay that Ruth Canham would not be at home. You should believe only half you hear, therefore it was clearly a duty to convince him that he ought not to be so credulous. Lastly, even though she should find out he was right, she would still attain her chief purpose, and have her own way.

"There is nothing like possessing good sense,"

thought Barbara, as she plodded along. "Dear! I wish my feet would not look so like a miller's. How hot it is, Ben, and I am so thirsty."

Ben lurched along, with his bushy tail in the air and his tongue lolling out very much on one side; he did not seem to enjoy his walk, any more than his mistress did, and so draggled and feverish was his aspect—rather rollicking, too, that Bab's mind recurred to dog-days and hydrophobia in a most pleasing way, and she steadily refused to proceed till Ben had descended into the miry ways of a half-dried pool, and helped himself liberally to some of its stagnant contents. She was rather relieved after that, and gathered herself a hazel switch to drive away the flies; they were assiduous in their attentions this afternoon, and then they went on; she had ceased trotting, however, long ago, and had degenerated into a walk; by-and-by it became a drag, then a drawl, it would have matched St. Ronans' any day, only St. Ronans' languid drawl was easy and graceful, and Bab's was not, it was more like a slow roll than any thing else. It was quite a relief when they came in sight of the half-baked gardens of the Mill; Ben was among the French beans and cabbages in a moment, but Bab called him back. No one responded to her knock, so they went in.

The great kitchen was empty, and fresh and cool, so Bab sat down on a settle and rested herself; there

were voices in the outhouse, but she was far too tired to go in search of them. "By-and-bye," and "presently," she said, and then she nearly went to sleep.

The little orchard looked sunny and green as usual, but the cows had left it, and taken refuge in cooler quarters; the side garden round the house flamed with carnations and great patches of nasturtium; there were grey spaces of lavender, too, and bunches of sweet-peas; inside the kitchen was a faint smell of spicy clove pinks. "Ah, ah," Barbara could hear in the distance, in Paul Hillyard's voice. Reuben crawled in on his hands and knees in hot pursuit of a black beetle; "Bebe—be-be"—he gurgled out, and rolled at Barbara's feet like a fat puppy.

Bab picked him up, tucking him under her arm like a parcel, and went out, Ben leaping up after her with demonstrations of joy. Winnie met them on the threshold, and said "Peep-bo — and a Bear, Lisha's big black bear," and went and hid herself. Bebe kicked up his legs under Barbara's arm, and howled in unison. "A noisy party," remarked Barbara, placidly, and put him down.

It was a cool outer kitchen. Naomi was ironing out white piles of linen, in the midst of flowering plants and shining shells, the low broad lattice, wide open, looked out on a square stoneyard and cow-house. There was a sweet, milky smell, a crumpled

white head showed itself, and a moist, black mouth slobbered through a little green gate in the distance; some pigeons fluttered and pecked on the stone-crop; inside there was shade, red tiles and fresh-scoured tins. "Ah, how nice and cool it looks, Naomi," cried Barbara, with a long-drawn sigh of relief.

Paul Hillyard rose from his wicker-chair, and offered it to Barbara; he had checked shirt sleeves, an open waistcoat, and a fresh-coloured face, his light hair curled over his head like a baby's, and he had large blue eyes. Barbara admired him more than she did Geoffrey Hunsden.

"May I sit down?" she said, and looked at him with an approving nod.

"Aye, just there," and Naomi paused in her ironing. "My master will fetch you some cider. Paul, some cider for the young lady; she looks dead beat, and no wonder."

"The sun has rare power," added Paul. "Is that your dog, Miss Heathcote?—even the brute beasts feel the weather, you see—my cows, there, can't eat, poor things. I'll give him some water," he continued, for Ben, with more freedom than good manners, was burrowing in a large earthen jar, while a very small kitten, quite an imp of a thing, was up on end with excitement at the restless wagging of his tail.

Ben obeyed the whistle, and the kitten sat up and

spat at him with fury as he darted past her, and then followed him, gingerly licking her paws at intervals, as kittens will; the laws of continual movement seemed to puzzle her; she settled herself on a wheelbarrow and watched him, and every time he left off drinking she spat at him, and growled from her inside, and then went on licking herself pleasantly. Ben found her capricious, and turned his attention to the pigeons, but they wheeled off with a great clatter, and left him; never was dog left so long without amusement; so he became inquisitive about a snail, and then stretched himself out on the flags and went to sleep.

Winnie came out from behind the eight-day clock and minced terribly, she wanted to assert her own individuality. "They cocks and hens have gone out walking," said Winnie—she seemed disposed for an argument—"and they 'ittle uns have yellow coats like Winnie's best, only Winnie has no flappers."

"Bebe-bebe," roared Reuben, lustily.

Naomi took him up and placed him amongst the flower-pots; and then she silenced Winnie. "Little gurls mustn't talk; little gurls as talk ain't good little girls."

"Don't the cocks and hens go to heaven?" says Winnie.

"Hear her!" exclaimed Naomi, with a sort of proud despair. "Children will talk, and there's no

letting them; Paul there doesn't know how to put off her questions—do you, Paul?"

"Nay; Winnie has a rare tongue of her own," answered Paul, as he patted Winnie's head fondly.

"The 'ittle black bantam has died," quoth Winnie, "and Pussie ate the 'ittle yellow un; are they both gone to heaven, and what do they do with their bones?"

"If little gurls talk, mammie will put them in the corner," said Naomi, solemnly; "and they can't have the pie-crust cake with the currants in it, that they were going to have for tea."

Winnie stopped, startled with this view of the subject. She weighed the material against the spiritual, and found herself hungry. "Are there many currants in it, mammie?"

"A power of 'em," said Paul, winking at Barbara.

"Then I don't care for oo, cocks and hens," nodded Winnie, running to her father, "Winnie thinks oo 'tupid. Where's the black bears, feyther, as mocked and ate up all the 'ittle uns?" asked Winnie, gravely, and then she buried her head in her father's coat.

"That is the worst of children," remarked Barbara, candidly; "they hinder conversation. Naomi, where is Ruth?" she was afraid Leigh was right after all; so she began to feel cross.

"Ruth has gone to Crowley, Miss Heathcote."

"To Crowley!" and Barbara stopped in g re

astonishment: Leigh had gone to Crowley, too, —what a coincidence!

Naomi put her iron against her cheek, and nodded smiling. "Aye, to Crowley; Ruth has a friend there, a dressmaker, who lives in a little street leading off High Street, afore you come to the Church, she works for the Vicar's daughters, does Miss Monmouth; but they do say that the Vicar himself is going blind, and that he'll be—be what, Paul?"

"Nay; I never minded of what Kitty Monmouth said."

"Superannuated," suggested Barbara, mildly.

"Aye, that's the word; my head gets tiresome of times over words, since Reuben was born. Paul does not like Kitty Monmouth," she continued, meditatively; "he thinks her a queer friend for our Ruth."

"So I do," repeated Paul vigorously; "Kitty is nought but a freakish sort of a creature, with her head packed full of rubbish; she ain't Ruth's sort, no, that she aint—a bit saucy girl like that."

Paul Hillyard knocked the ashes out of his pipe-bowl; his brow looked stormy. Barbara glanced from one to the other, she guessed that there had been words that morning over Ruth's little holiday.

"If she must have a junket, or a spree, or whatever they call 'em in these parts, why couldn't the lass have bided a bit softly, and gone with us to Dairy-mead?—that's my wife's old home, Miss

Heathcote, it has gotten into goodish hands now, and often I put the old mare in her traces, and take the women-folks and the bit children over to the old place. When first she came here Ruth was always for going; 'Ah, do let us go and see dear Dairymead, Paul,' she used to say; and, howsoever inconvenient it might be, Naomi and I always made a push forward to please her. Didn't we, Missis?"

"Aye, Paul," answered Naomi, sadly; "but that was before Ruth was so changed."

"Changed, Naomi?" cried Barbara, eagerly.

But Naomi looked at her husband doubtfully before she answered: "This young lady is fond of our Ruth, Paul," she said; "she often comes to see her here, and at the village school, too."

Paul took his pipe out of his mouth—it was empty, and guileless of smoke—and struck his hand on the table. "She has saved our Winnie, wife, and that's more to the purpose; Miss Heathcote, I'm not a man of words—no Hillyard is—but father and son, they've known their duty, and when I forget what you've done for my little girl, may I be—." He stopped himself, brought his hand down on the table, and went on trying to smoke.

Bab bowed benignantly—if people would magnify her little offices, what was she to do? No one had thought her a heroine at home, only Bab; but had she not saved two lives, Winnie's and St. Ronans'?

—At, least, did they not say that she had? and what had Miss Vokes done to compare with that? Here, at Dort's Mill, she was considered in the light of a benefactor; they showed her confidence, and treated her as a friend of years. Naomi and she had had long talks together, and she knew all about Dairymead, and Ruth's lovers. She wished Hester, or even Miss Vokes could see her now. Naomi wiped her eyes—as she always did at this allusion—and then she put another iron to heat, while she sorted the contents of a great basket.

Barbara watched her with interest. "How is Ruth changed?" she asked again.

"It's many and many a week since I saw it first," said Naomi, mournfully—"don't let Winnie touch the irons, Paul—we thought it was the school that tired her, and begged and begged of her till we were moidered, to give it up; but she wouldn't hear of it. 'If I don't have occupation I shall go mad,' she said to me once, and there was such a worried look on her face as she said it; and then she was for having more work, and more work; she was always at her needle for the children, or visiting the sick, and sitting up with them; and if she were ever so tired and wan-looking she wouldn't miss her evening walk—no, not for anything. I wanted her to give that up, too, for people got talking about it—folks will, you know; they can't understand such a pure natural creature as

our Ruth—and Paul, there, he wanted to go with her just for protection like, and to make 'em hold their tongues, but she wouldn't let him; and when we pressed her, my master especially, she flamed up scarlet, and went and shut herself up in her own room, and wouldn't have any walk, and cried her eyes out. That was the night, Paul, when we heard those footsteps on the gravel walk outside that nearly skeered her into a fit."

"Yes," said Paul, gravely; "but I couldn't make out Ruth at all that night, no how."

"No; I know you didn't. He was angry with her and me; he said I spoilt her and made her fanciful and contrary. Men don't understand the windings of such natures as Ruth's, and then they flare out and get violent, and then it's all up."

"Ruth bears no malice," said Barbara, smiling; "she always speaks of Paul as being a kind brother to her."

"Aye; he's that and more than that—" answered Naomi; but Paul stopped her.

"And I'll be that to the end of time, howsoe'er she tried me. Miss Heathcote, you are our own Winnie's preserver, and Ruth's friend. I can say to you what I would to no other, and think it safe—not but what it's well known to the neighbours that I courted Ruth before I did my missis here."

"Paul, Paul!" and there was such a rush of color over the poor sickly face.

"Eh, wife, and what's harm in that? Ne'er a man marries his first love they say; would you believe it, Miss Heathcote?" he continued, with the frank simplicity that seemed natural to him, "that when they were girls together, and I the miller's lad round the corner, that my wife was the handsomer of the two?"

"Oh no, Paul, never," exclaimed Naomi.

"Yes she was," he persisted, "and the beauty of the village; there were more than one that would have married her then, but she caught that cussed small pox nursing a friend that afterwards behaved ungrateful to her, and she nearly died of it, too."

"Aye, that I did," returned Naomi, sighing; "but when I saw the changed looks of some who had been my friends, and the pity of others, it was hard to be thankful for my spared life. I remember when I first saw my poor scarred face, Ruth had much ado to comfort me; I wished I had died then, Miss Heathcote."

"I was courting Ruth then," continued Paul, with a proud humility; "she was always a hard one to her suitors—carried her head high; in fact, almost as she wanted to be made a lady. A farmer's daughter can marry any one, I heard her say once, and never all the years I followed her, could I get so much as

a smile, or thank you. It was always, 'You are a good man, Paul Hillyard, but I will not marry you.'"

"And you gave it up after a time, I suppose," observed Barbara; she felt she was called upon to say something in answer to this strange confidence, but her look showed more interest than her words.

"A man can't go on for ever," said Paul, sadly; "Naomi favored me, and so I married her."

"But he always liked Ruth the best," sighed Naomi.

Barbara faced round upon her with astonishment. She understood now the placid sadness that was always expressed on Naomi's face, but the blue eyes looked trustingly and proudly for all that on handsome Paul Hillyard.

"Ah, but it was long before you cared for Naomi."

"Aye, but I wouldn't change her now for a dozen Ruths. Nay, never look so startled, wench, you knew that before."

"I was not sure of it, Paul," she whispered, and with that bright flush who would have called Naomi plain? She took up Reuben presently, and rocked him in her arms, with her eyes full of happy tears. Barbara sat and meditated.

"There must be something on Ruth's mind," she began at length.

Paul laid his pipe down, and looked triumphantly round.

"There's nothing like a woman for helping one after all; they beat men, and there's no denying that. Miss Heathcote, you have said the right thing; there must be something on her mind."

"But what?" mused Barbara, still aloud, "that is the question."

"True, Miss Heathcote—you mind her, Naomi—but what? that is the question."

"Some one must ask her," returned Barbara, in the same solemn manner; "Naomi, it must be you."

"Naomi, it must be you," repeated Paul, placidly.

"No, no," returned his wife, much distressed, "Ruth puts me off with a laugh or a caress; there is no getting at her when she is in one of her absent moods; no, nor it mustn't be you, Paul; why shouldn't Miss Heathcote do it? Ruth is fond of her."

"I always said you were clever, Naomi," said her husband proudly; "cleverness is better than handsomeness any day. Yes, Miss Heathcote can ask her."

"So I will," replied Barbara, complacently, and so they settled it.

There was not much conversation after that, for Winnie, who had been playing Joseph in the Pit, with

four fingers and her father's buttonhole, and the thumb standing up for the Ishmaelitish merchant, suddenly became talkative, if not rampant; and as the cocks and hens had returned home from their perambulations on a neighboring dust-heap, Barbara was conducted forth in triumph to see the speckled hen, and the pigeons which were ladies, and wore ruffs round their necks. Bebe crawled out after them; whereupon the kitten became fantastic, and made overtures to him from the extreme edge of the wheelbarrow, comporting herself generally like a crazy acrobat; a wheezy puppy made his appearance also from under a water-butt, and considered that he had found his mother—rather a seedy-looking terrier—in Ben; Ben smelt him disdainfully, and overset him with his paw in a moment, where he lay howling foolishly; there were odd woody sounds of horns striking bluntly on the little gate. Barbara went and fed the milky mothers with sweet wisps of hay, and then she thought of ox-eyed Juno and Ruth.

Naomi was setting out the tea-table in the big kitchen; the kettle was gossiping sociably in the outer premises, where there was a smell of freshly dried clothes.

"You must stay with us till sundown," Paul had said, and Barbara had cheerfully assented.

"That's Adam, and that's Eve," remarked Winnie.

"Adam has a red bib, you see, and a rainbow of feathers on his tail, and he always crows when they hens lay an egg."

"The child's knowledge is Biblical almost to profanity," thought Bab. Winnie chatted on.

"They ladies with the ruffs coo and eat up all the sweet corn; Snow and Dapple have wet mouths; and the puppy and Bebe won't go to heaven."

"Good gracious, Winnie!"

"Bebe dirties his pinny, and walks like the sarpent, and the puppy won't eat Winnie's crusts." She looked up at the blue sky reflectively.

"When Winnie's an angel," she said, "Winnie will have yellow flappers;" and then they went in. Barbara enjoyed her tea very much; she thought it better even than Mrs. Strath's; she had never drunk out of such gaudy teacups before; and it was such a surprise too, when she had emptied hers, to find a parrot in full plumage, red and green, at the bottom. Winnie chirped and said, "Oh a Sunday Dickie," when she saw hers. Bebe put his red shoes on the table, and held out his moist crust to Barbara with a loving smile; he and Winnie wanted to feed her with all their crusts.

Barbara thought it all excellent fun; the pie-crust cakes were delicious, and so was the hard yellow butter and the honey.

"I've never enjoyed myself more," she said, when

she took leave; "tell Ruth I shall come up and see her in a day or two."

"Come up to-morrow," said Naomi; "Paul is going to market, and I shall be out for an hour or two in the evening."

"Very well," answered Barbara, and then she went home.

CHAPTER VI.

"CIRCUMSTANCES ALTER CASES."

"Yet was there light around her brow,
A holiness in those dark eyes,
Which show'd, though wand'ring earthward now,
Her spirit's home was in the skies.
Yes; for a spirit pure as hers
Is always pure, e'en while it errs;
As sunshine, broken in the rill,
Though turned astray, is sunshine still!"

T. Moore.

THERE is nothing like experience for teaching people wisdom; this time Barbara put off her walk till sundown.

The evening was far advanced when she arrived at the mill; tea was over, and the children gone to bed. Ruth sat in her usual place sewing at a frock for Winnie; she greeted Barbara with pleasure,—but her manner was flurried and a little anxious: the old constrained look that had so often amazed Barbara was plainly discernible to-night.

"Naomi is right," she said to herself; "she is sadly changed. What ails her? She looks as wan and

weak as a sick child; and her eyes are heavy, just as though she had been weeping."

Wan and heavy-eyed it might be; but, spite of all, her beauty was wonderful; it almost oppressed Barbara.

Winnie was singing herself to sleep; they could hear her through the open window: it floated lightly towards them in a shrill childish treble, with a sleepy break every now and then of placid prose. "'I am going to glory,'" sang Winnie, "'Glory, glory.' Who makes the flappers? Do the angels? No, Bebe, no; naughty Bebe. 'All nations who on earth do dwell.' 'We shall never part again,—no, never part again,'" and so on.

"Did you have a pleasant day, Ruth?" asked Barbara. "I was sorry you were out. You spent it with your friend at Crowley."

"Yes, I found Kitty Monmouth at home: I went by appointment, you know. She was very kind and obliging, and sent gingerbread soldiers to the children. She is fond of children, is Kitty; we had a long talk about the school."

"Did you spend all your day at Crowley?" inquired Barbara. "What an ugly place! Rows of little red-brick houses, and a hideous church, and no fields; nothing but dust-heaps and market-gardens. Did you spend all your day there?"

"Kitty Monmouth is very good-natured," returned

Ruth, hurriedly. "Paul and Naomi don't care for her, because she's a little flighty; but she's been a true friend to me. She was busy, too, making dresses for the Vicar's youngest daughter. She is going to be married, they say—and to a man old enough to be her father. One was quite lovely—a gauze, pale green, you know."

"Never mind the Vicar's daughter," returned Barbara, impatiently; "I hate the very thought of a dressmaker. I never could be friends with one; their rooms are always three-cornered, and have four horse-hair chairs and a sofa, and a round table full of fashion-books,—I should like to burn all the ladies with the smirking faces,—and a great wire thing with pink calico over it; and the fire generally smokes, and there's always a cat rolled up on one's new silk, and a lot of fusty, musty, gaudy old dresses hanging from hooks, and looking like Bluebeard's wives without their heads, and there's always a smell of boiled mutton; and," continued Barbara, rapidly losing breath, "if there's one thing I hate more than another, it's boiled mutton and capers."

"We had boiled mutton yesterday," said Ruth, laughing, "and we ate it in a room not a bit like what you described; for it opened with a glass door into such a pretty little garden, with an oyster-shell fountain, and an arbor, and a great pear-tree. But that is enough about Kitty Monmouth's.

How do you get on with your painting, Miss Heathcote?"

"Oh, fairly—that is, well enough. St. Ronans is rather a lazy master; he gets talking and forgets one. When is the school treat to come off at the Park, Ruth? Has Lady Hunsden made her arrangements?"

"She has; and so have the rest of us, but Mr. Herbert's holiday has upset us all; it won't be for another month now—not till the Vicar's home again: they say he's going to bring Mr. Sydney back with him. That was a powerful sermon we heard at church last Sunday; was it not, Miss Heathcote?"

The sermon that Ruth mentioned had been canvassed finely in Sunningford; it had been preached by a stranger, and had quite electrified many honest folk, who thought Mr. Herbert's quiet, gentlemanly discourses perfection; he was a little too learned occasionally—but what did that matter? They had slept through many a quotation from the Fathers, many a wonderful disquisition on original sin and election; why should they puzzle their brains over the deep-searching doctrines of Calvin? But there had been no sleeping over this sermon; Sunningford had sat winking and open-mouthed under such thundering eloquence.

Old Betty Moggs, of the Union, had wagged her bonnet incessantly, and wrung out her shrivelled

hands. "It's like silver trumpets," she said; "ah, we're miserable critturs, all of us; and Lor' have mussy on old Betty Moggs."

Barbara had listened to this marvellous sermon, and had been made a little uncomfortable by it, and had talked it all over with Nest. It was on St. Peter's fall, and the subject—always a thrilling and painful one—had been finely handled. Ruth had touched on it now, and Barbara recalled all Nest had said.

"It was a wonderful sermon," she repeated, musingly; "that was the Sunday when you felt so faint, Ruth—and Mrs. Deans gave you her smelling-bottle. I should remember that sermon if it were only from the way Leigh fidgeted; he is dreadfully restless in church, to be sure. Nest told me she never heard a finer discourse, it was so eloquent; and father and Hester talked about it at dinner; but I can't, no, I can't understand it."

"Can't understand what, Miss Heathcote?"

"Why the greatest saints have the deepest falls. David, and St. Peter, and the Magdalene, and all the rest of them. I'm very wicked, but I don't seem to see it at all."

"It was to keep them humble, I suppose," suggested Ruth.

"But it's very unsatisfactory," returned Barbara.

"So it is, to our poor human reason; but, you see,

Miss Heathcote, that these great saints would have thought themselves so good and favored that they would have got puffed up if the devil hadn't been allowed to tempt them, and make them do wrong sometimes."

"But what's the good of trying to keep right?" sighed Barbara; "we are not saints, and are never likely to be—but, you see, even they were not kept from these terrible falls."

"I don't know; it is a very difficult subject, but one thing is certain, that the devil tempts those most who try the hardest."

"Does he?" returned Barbara, in surprise.

"Yes, indeed. Where is it that one is most tried by wandering thoughts? In church. You see you are not safe even there; they come to you in the sanctuary itself, or in your closet when you kneel down to pray."

"Humph," observed Barbara—she liked talking about saints, but she was out of her depth now—people who never really pray can't be said to have wandering thoughts; it was pleasanter to find fault with St. Peter than with oneself.

Ruth had laid down her work now, and her eyes took their misty, far-away look; there was a depth of pain in them.

"Miss Heathcote, God is good, and we may be trying our hardest; He has kept us, maybe all our

life long, from any great harm or wrong-doing, and then all of a sudden our fall comes."

"It can never come to you, Ruth," cried Barbara, eagerly, touched by the sweet purity of the face before her; but, almost before the words left her, Ruth had shuddered away from them, with a quick gesture that was almost horror.

"Oh, Miss Heathcote!" she gasped; and then she sat pale and shrinking, sewing at her work, and trying to gain courage to speak. Barbara watched her with a nameless dismay; something cold seemed to strike her with a sense of dread. "We're all going to glory," sang Winnie from above—"but not the puppy, and not Be-be—addidujah, addidujah!" Ruth raised her great brown eyes to the "quiet breadths of evening sky;" they were full of tears.

"I thought with you, Miss Heathcote, once. I felt so safe, so good and happy. I used to look down on people, and think myself better than they; if I heard of any one going wrong, I used to be so merciless. Often and often has Naomi said to me, 'Ruth, we can never know what we are till we're tempted; who knows how busy the powers of evil were round that poor soul? Do not let us judge so hastily, for one day we may fall, and have no pity shown us;'" but, added Ruth, with a sigh, "I never minded her—never—and so my punishment will be sore."

"My dear Ruth!"

"My punishment will be sore," she returned, with streaming eyes. "To know the right and yet to turn away from it, to be tempted from the path of duty with our eyes wide open, to fall away from integrity, what punishment will be sufficient for these things?"

"Ruth, what is your trouble?"

She shivered at the question, but there was no response.

"I have been your true friend, Ruth; tell me your sorrow."

She hid her face in her hands, her bosom rose and fell with repressed sobs—low bitter sobs, but still she did not answer.

"Ruth, if you have done wrong and are sorry for it, surely Naomi and Paul will forgive you, they love you so dearly: what wrong have you done, can you have done, that should make their hearts hard to you? Surely it is you who are faithless to them."

"Faithless to them, Miss Heathcote! oh, forgive me, how can you know where the wrong lies?—sometimes I do not know myself. I was so blinded, and it all seemed so beautiful;" she dried her eyes with a sudden passionate movement; a strange tender look, more proud than sorrowful, seemed to shine in them. "I am weak to-night," she said, with a little gasp, "weak and not myself; if I have done wrong, I must abide by it, for it is past undoing. God forgive me, for I would not undo it if I could."

"Not undo your wrong!" Honest plain-spoken Barbara could not understand it at all. "You would not set it right if you could, Ruth?"

"I think my good angel has forsaken me," cried Ruth, wildly. "I have done wrong—have I not confessed it? but I glory in it. Miss Heathcote, you do not understand, you cannot; but remember this, if you are ever tempted to be hard on me, remember that Ruth tried to be good, but when her time of temptation came, her good angel deserted her."

"I don't believe it," returned Barbara, staunchly; "it is not right, and it is not scriptural. I never preach, indeed I don't know how; but if we have a good angel—and Nest says we have, and I'm sure I hope so—he won't desert and turn his back upon us in our need. I don't read my Bible perhaps as much as I ought," confessed Bab; "I find it rather dull, sometimes, especially the genealogies and Leviticus; but your talk does not seem to me to be quite scriptural, and you to go to church, and sit with the children."

"Oh, my children!" moaned Ruth; and then very hurriedly, "Miss Heathcote, leave me; indeed I am not myself to-night; come again to me, if you will, but leave me now."

"You do not care for me, then, Ruth Canham?"

"Do I not? aye, dearly, dearly," and Ruth took the little hand stretched out to her, and kissed it almost passionately. "God bless you, Barbara Heathcote."

"And you, too, Ruth; but if you love Barbara, you must trust in her. There, there, I will not vex you. I will go; one day I hope you will tell me all, and we shall be friends again."

"Yes, yes," returned Ruth; she was trembling now. There was a little click, a soft lifting of a latch from the stone yard outside, joyous whines from the foolish puppy.

"Winnie wants me," said Ruth, rising with a scared look! "can you let yourself out, Miss Heathcote?"

"Of course, of course," replied Barbara. "Ben, Ben, what are you doing, Ben?" for Ben was snuffing excitedly at the door that communicated with the outer kitchen; "it's only the puppy, sir, so come away." Ben obeyed reluctantly, and followed his mistress slowly into the mill garden; he wanted to return once or twice, and gave a dubious whine or two, but Bab was so peremptory with him, and shook her little hazel switch so menacingly in his face, that he was obliged to abandon his desire; it humiliated him though, and touched up his pride a little, so he had it out with two or three dogs on his way, and having laid them all on their backs howling, felt refreshed and himself again.

Barbara was what St. Ronans would have called a little difficult that evening; her individuality was striking, she quite bristled with contradiction; Dr. Heathcote thought she was tired.

"Tired! not a bit of it," snapped Barbara. "Ben met the butcher's dog and nearly murdered him, and then he licked his lips; he would not drink when he came in, and looked rather bloodthirsty. I am always thinking of hydrophobia. Tired! why I would walk all the way to Briarsley, if I only knew which road Leigh would take:" and then she subsided into private life and a book; she read it upside down for a little while, and then went fast asleep.

But she woke captious.

There were soft crunching sounds on the gravel outside, where Hester and Connie were pacing up and down, and then quick breaks of shadow as they passed and repassed the lighted window. Dr. Heathcote's paper and spectacles lay beside his reading-lamp: he had been called out to see a patient. Leigh sat alone, elbows on knees, pushing his fingers through his heavy hair, and whistling in an under-breath; only every now and then there was a quick-drawn breath, like a sigh. Barbara was down upon him in a moment.

"It is a 'Sally come up,' indeed," she said irascibly; "that's a choice ballad you're whistling; why, wherever have you been all this evening, Leigh?"

He started, and flung his hair off his forehead in his old way,—"I thought you were asleep, Barbara; good night! pleasant dreams to you;" and he resumed his whistling. Barbara rubbed her eyes.

"Where have you been, Leigh?" she repeated fretfully; "why don't you answer a person?"

"I never answer impertinent questions," returned Leigh, decidedly; "come, shut up, Bab, and mind your own business. I am sitting in this chair at present, and am very much enlivened by your pleasing conversation."

"And that's your answer, is it, Leigh?" She had crossed the room with sleepy gravity, and was standing beside him.

"Of course it is; and for the future, Bab—here's a private hint for you—ask me no questions and I'll tell you no"——but she put her hand over his mouth and stopped him.

"Leigh, Leigh!" and yet more sadly, "Oh, Leigh!"

"Well, what's the matter now, Dame Muffet?"

"The partnership is dissolved," said Barbara, in a serio-comic voice. "Gyp, Bab, and Co. is no more—it's only Bab and Co. now."

He stared at her, and began whistling again.

"No more walks; no more shrubbery strolls; no talks in the Den; no answers to civil questions—only snaps and sneers. Dame Muffet must take a new partner; for Co. has misbehaved himself, and nearly killed the butcher's dog, and looks feverish."

There was a shade of pity in Leigh's face; he looked at her a little wistfully.

"Dame Muffet must have a new partner, Gyp."

He gave a light laugh. "Well, Bab, which is it to be—Strath or St. Ronans? St. Ronans is most worth having; choose him, Babchen."

Two bright spots of color came into Barbara's cheeks, and then she could not believe her ears. "Whatever do you mean, Gyp?" she asked, slowly; but just at that minute Dr. Heathcote came back, and Leigh left the room. Barbara had spoken the truth in her quaint way: this unconscious barrier which had grown up between her and Leigh was no fancy; it was growing a tangible reality. He was never at home, never alone a moment with her if he could help it; her harmless questions were always met in this testy, impatient manner; if he could not silence her with a joke, he got angry. The old freedom of intercourse, the innocent twinship of affection in which they had hitherto lived, was fast becoming a thing of the past—a memory. Bab, who lamented so keenly over the trifling contradictions of daily life, kept her own counsel in this matter, and no one guessed the pain in the girl's heart when she first found she was losing the sweet empire of her brother's love.

She was a little anxious, she said once or twice to Mrs. Strath; but Hester was anxious too; they were afraid he had got into trouble again, his spirits were so variable, and he was so unlike himself; but that

was all. She kept her own private sorrow to herself. No wonder St. Ronans and even Nest found her a little difficult; for it would not have been Bab to bear her unhappiness quite patiently. But she rather embraced the doctrine of works, and went a great deal to the cottage on Bex Hill; she had a sort of idea that she was becoming great in her misfortunes. She got on very well with Mrs. Jackson, especially on secular subjects. She had a habit of confining herself to terrestrial matters till just before she took leave, when she generally plunged into a chapter without the slightest warning—pious jerks, as they might be called—and nothing provoked her more than interrupting her by asking a question, and she always answered these questions in a very loud voice, and with her eyes shut. But she would have enjoyed herself more if she could have kept Miss Shepherd out of the conversation. There is no denying that that departed saint aggravated her; she felt as though she almost hated her.

"I wish we were all in the court of the Gentiles," said Bab, one day, when she was very much put to it on the subject of freewill and election. "Mrs. Jackson, if we climb up so high, we shall get dizzy and topple over—let us finish the chapter;" and Mrs. Jackson, struck by that pious yearning, abstained from further comment that day; and the next time Barbara coaxed Nest to go with her.

"You are so clever at these things, and I want to take a lesson," she said, humbly; so Nest, marvelling much, and a little loath, went with her. And she got on so famously that she filled Barbara with envy; she was rather discontented when they came out.

"What a lovely evening!" said Nest; she was flushed and a little eager; her talk had excited her.

"Of course it's a fine evening," returned Barbara, quickly; "but that's not the point, Nest. However do you manage to explain things so beautifully?"

"Who, I?—oh, I don't know. I suppose people talk best about what they feel most deeply. Now I always think that subject the most striking in the Old Testament."

"Yes, yes," interrupted Barbara. "Never mind the subject. What I mean is, that you got on like a house on fire, and everything seemed to fit into each other as smoothly as possible. Now I am sure I have that poor woman's welfare at heart, and want to do her good, and all that; but I suppose—well, the fact is," and here Barbara snapped at a retreating truth —"I am afraid I don't feel these things very deeply after all."

"I am afraid that is it, Barbara," returned Nest, very slowly. "I wish you could care more about religion."

"There, I knew you would preach," exclaimed Barbara, peevishly. "Every one preaches to me.

When it's not Mrs. Strath, it's Norman, or Hester, or even St. Ronans. I declare I am sick of it."

"Oh, Barbara! you know I never intended to preach," cried Nest, reproachfully. Her tone recalled Barbara to good humour. "You never talk cant, Nest; don't think I meant that," she hastened to explain.

"It's an unconscious preach, that's what it is; and the worst of that sort is, it makes itself felt. But, to return to what I was saying, I can't talk and make much of subjects — draw inferences, as Mrs. Jackson calls them, as you do."

"You will in time, you know," said Nest, soothingly. "It wants practice and experience."

"Oh, I shall have plenty of both when I undertake my district. But just to give you an instance, Nest, why, the other day I was reading about Noah's ark ——"

"Well?" asked Nest, inquiringly; for Barbara had paused, and looked a little ashamed.

"Well, of course Mrs. Jackson wanted me to say something about the terrible judgment of the Flood, and the rainbow promise, and all that, but I couldn't; I was wondering all the time, however they found room for the elephant, and what they fed it on, and how unpleasant it must have been to live in a floating Zoological Gardens."

Nest broke into a merry laugh. "Oh, Barbara,"

she said, "I am afraid you try to make yourself out more childish than you really are." Bab's eyes twinkled. "You, the clever Miss Heathcote, and to talk this rubbish!"

Barbara gave a little sniff, and looked delighted; she had given a comic turn to the conversation and was beginning to feel happy. "Miss Vokes has no sense of humor," she remarked, *à propos* to nothing. Nest was mystified.

They were just on the outskirts of Sunningford; in another minute they would pass the cottage of Susan Moggs, the slattern and scold of the village. It was a low, miserable-looking cottage, of a yellowish-grey color, and the garden that ran all round it was as unkempt and untended as its owner. Bab shrugged her shoulders at the straggling beds and paths overgrown with weeds; two small black pigs had got loose from an adjoining outhouse, and were making a day of it among the vegetables; in the porch stood a wretched-looking uncombed child, crying and whining like a starved puppy.

"Why, it's Tommy," cried Bab, "one of Hester's scholars. He is the black sheep of the school, is Tommy; but I must run and ask him what is the matter," for Bab had a weakness for boys. The boy took his fist out of his eyes, but went on blubbering. "Now, Tommy, if you won't tell me, I shall call a policeman," said Barbara, decidedly. There was

one policeman in the whole place, and he was at present down with the rheumatism.

"I'll tell ye, missis," he gasped out, "Mam's took ill, she be; and the little 'un, Suz, she's fell out of her chair, she have, and broken her arm; and baby, she——"

"Oh, hush—hush!" cried Bab, hurriedly. "Nest, come here." But Nest had heard, and was drawing near with a face full of sympathy. "What shall we do?" asked Bab, with a little flurry.

Nest took the command with a quiet decision that astonished Barbara.

"Here, Tommy," she said, "run down the village as fast as you can, and ask Dr. Heathcote or young Dr. Strath to step up here at once; be quick, Tommy."

But Tommy needed no second bidding; he nodded, took to his heels, and was out of sight in a moment.

"Now let's go in and see what's to be done."

"Go in?" returned Barbara; "no, I must not, Daddie said—wait, Nest." But Nest, with a look of mild reproach at Barbara's hesitation, which she put down at once to timidity, unlatched the door and went in. So she—Nest—was to have all the work and the glory, and Barbara must remain outside. "Circumstances alter cases," thought Bab, and she followed her boldly in.

For a moment both the young girls drew back

involuntarily; they were not prepared for such wretchedness. It was a small, squalid room, dirty, disordered, and heated to suffocation, every crack and cranny of the one small window being stuffed up with rags and such like small gear; over the black, smoky fire was a battered kettle, trying hard to boil, and dribbling its contents at intervals out of its leaky side; every now and then there was a faint hiss and splutter of perishing water.

There was a woman lying on the miserable bed, with a crying baby beside her, and huddled up at the foot another child, moaning piteously. She sat up erect in bed, and looked at them, moving her head from side to side, and pulling at her frowzy nightcap as she did so. Barbara knew the red face and vixenish mouth well,—it was Susan Moggs all over; but she was shocked at the vacant, wandering glances and meaningless words.

"There's Suz," she said, rocking herself, and speaking in an aggravated voice, "there's Suz has been and fallen into the fire; where's my big stick? Tummus, you're not minding the little 'uns; come here, you rascal, I say," and she dropped on her pillow muttering.

"It's fever, Nest," cried Bab, in a terrified whisper.

"If you are afraid, you had better go out, Barbara," returned Nest very quietly; "I shall remain here." And she uncorked the window—so to speak

—and set open the door; a cool, refreshing current of air passed through the place. "Do go out, Barbara, if you're afraid," she repeated, as she passed her.

"I'm not afraid," returned Barbara, crossly; "let me hold that baby, Nest;" and she took up the fretful infant, and walked him up and down in a thorough draught. She did not like to confess it, but the foul air of the place made her feel faint and sick; but she forgot her unpleasant sensations in her astonishment at Nest. Nest did wonders. She found out, though how Barbara could not tell, that the child's arm was not broken, but only bruised and dislocated; so by a little petting and humoring of the smoky fire, and management of the leaking kettle, she contrived to procure some warm water, ragsfull of which were tenderly applied to the blackened arm, till the little sufferer, soothed and comforted, ceased the piteous wail which had so excited the poor mother, and lay quite quiet in Nest's lap, staring at her out of two great black eyes. Bab paused in her soft bye-bying walk, and stood by her quite open-mouthed, and a little envious.

"You do that as though you had been accustomed to children all your life," said Barbara, with a furtive sigh.

"I—I have rarely touched one; hush, Suz, don't move. I want to lay you down." And Nest

very carefully deposited the little creature on a rude couch, composed of the rug and some old shawls.

"Speak to her every now and then, Barbara, while I attend to her poor mother."

Barbara nodded and resumed her walk; the baby had been restless and fretful hitherto, but its moving cradle pleased it; it began to coo softly, as babies will, its open mouth moving over Barbara's cheek: these blind aimless touches, these crumpled hands, these faintly uttered coos, were new revelations to Barbara. She forgot the foul room, the pestilential odors, Suz lying with her black stiffened arm, the mutterings of the woman, even the dirt-begrimed garments that she had first touched so daintily, and her eyes took a soft dreamy look as they followed Nest about.

But there was no dreaming for Nest. She was working hard now, turning the pillows, smoothing the tumbled clothes, freshening the poor creature's burning hands and face, and giving drink and soothing words together, then straightening the miserable room and brushing up the hearth, warming a little milk for the baby, and showing Barbara how to administer it. By-and-by she had contrived a more comfortable resting-place for Suz, and then, and not till then, she went to the open door for a fresh whiff of air, leaning heavily against it, as one sorely tired. Barbara saw her fast-paling face, and hastened to her.

"Do you feel faint, Nest?"

"Only a little, but my head aches so; it is that close smell, I think. Oh, there is Norman. I am so glad, and Tommy is with him; let us go back into the room, Barbara."

Barbara followed her in, but she felt very guilty. Nest was acting innocently; Nest had not disobeyed her father. Bab wondered if Norman had heard of the injunction, and whether he would be displeased. She had never come across him in his professional capacity before—perhaps he would think her conduct praiseworthy, taking a leaf out of Miss Vokes's book. Yes, she was sure he would think it praiseworthy; she went on bye-bying valiantly, with the goose-step of a practised nurse. There was a clang of the little gate, and a quick stride up the gravel path, and then Dr. Strath's shadow blocked up the little entry. He took a swift survey of the whole—Nest, Suz, Barbara, and the baby—and then he turned round to Tommy. "Miss Vokes," Barbara could hear him say. Tommy ducked and vanished.

"Rock-a-bye, baby, hush—hush — hush!" said Barbara.

Dr. Strath walked straight up to her, with a brow as black as thunder.

"Lay that baby down in the crib, Barbara," he said, sternly. "What are you looking at me for? do what I tell you; there now, go into the front garden, and I will send Nest to you."

"But Suz and Mrs. Moggs, Norman; do let me take the baby out with me, please."

"Do what I tell you," he returned, with a look that made Barbara quail. He scarcely glanced at Nest or the woman, but stood by till Barbara had got rid of her burthen, and was turning sulkily to the door.

"Is that the way he treats Miss Vokes?" she said to herself, and then Nest joined her.

"He says we are to wait for him; but what have we done, and why was he so angry with you?" Nest looked a little frightened.

"Who cares whether he is angry or not? I shan't wait," returned Bab, defiantly, and she swung the gate to and fro with an indecision that belied her words; "a pack of professional rubbish!" grumbled Barbara.

"Well, I don't know; he seems very angry; he spoke quite fiercely to you, Barbara, and I am sure we were doing our duty."

"You were: I am not so sure about mine," blurted out truthful Barbara. "There's Tommy. Tommy, where have you been?"

"Miss Vokes," panted out the boy; "and she——"

"Tommy, come here;" and Dr. Strath stood on the threshold; there was no disobeying him. Barbara pouted, and let him go. Nest leaned against the gate: her head was no better, and she was tired out.

"It was all that reading at Mrs. Jackson's," she said, "and the long hot walk and the close stifling room had finished it; but there, it was no use talking about it, she should be better presently, and there was Norman, yes, there he was again, speaking a few parting words to Tommy."

"Be sure you tell her that I will be back again in a couple of hours; and I will send up Betsy Baker to take her place;" and he came striding down towards the two girls. Nest was waiting for him; but Barbara was on ahead, trying to assume an air of unconscious dignity, and admiring the sunset. Dr. Strath was up with her in a trice, and then they all three walked on silently. Barbara took a stealthy glance at him occasionally, and that was all.

"Do you mind walking a little slower, Norman?" said Nest in a patient sort of a way. He looked at her, slackened his pace, and then it was all over with them.

"You have a headache, Nest, I can see that very plainly, and are as faint as you can be, and with reason; but you must not come to me for pity. I have none for imprudence and senselessness."

This roused Nest. "Why, Norman, how you talk! One would think we were doing wrong, Barbara and I, instead of trying to minister to the relief of these poor creatures."

"I have nothing to say to you, Nest," he returned; "you were merely ignorant, and doing every thing to the best of your ability. But I should like to ask, what Barbara meant by her conduct?"

"Should you?" was on the tip of Barbara's tongue; but she preserved an obstinate silence.

"I was very sorry to find you, Nest, in that reeking fever-den yonder. I fear you may have reason to regret it, poor child; but for Barbara there—Barbara, who never visits, never cares in any way about her poor and sick neighbours—to indulge in this mad freak, in direct disobedience to her father's orders." Here there was a little shocked "Oh!" from Nest. "Tell me, Barbara—you never equivocate—did you have no such order from Dr. Heathcote?"

Barbara nodded gloomily.

"The command was a stringent one, and given to Hester and Connie also. There were threats of this fever in Durnford; it might spread to Sunningford; it has spread, and, according to my prediction, Susan Moggs is the first victim."

"Has she really got the fever, Norman?"

"Really and positively. You have done a foolish thing, Nest; why did you not come in for Miss Vokes and me?"

"Tommy said Susy had broken her arm."

"Well?"

"Well, I thought we might go in and see what

was the matter, and hold the baby. Barbara said it was fever, and seemed frightened; so I told her to go out, and I would stay."

"You have disobeyed no order, Nest: if you like to run foolishly into danger, it was at your own risk; but Barbara knows that she ought to be ashamed of herself."

"Barbara knows nothing of the kind," she returned haughtily.

He did not look at her, or answer her, but continued what he was saying—

"I have sent for Miss Vokes; she is well seasoned and fit for this work; she and Betsy Baker will do all that is necessary."

"But will she get better, Norman?" asked Nest, pleadingly.

"Tut! how do I know? The chances are not in her favor, but time will show. Here we are at St. Ronans; run in, Nest, and change your dress, and wash your hands before you talk to your mother and Nigel. Prevention is better than cure. You need not tell them anything of it—Nigel is a nervous subject; forget all about it—that is the best." He spoke in his old kind manner, and Nest looked up at him with a grateful smile.

"I am not frightened, Norman."

"Frightened! of course not," he replied brusquely; "run in out of the dews. I will look in in a day

or two, and see how your head is; we must cure those headaches, Nest."

The rest of the walk was not specially enjoyable to Barbara. Dr. Strath maintained perfect silence; every minute Bab hoped he would leave her, or at least say something, but he did neither; and when they came to the green gate in the wall, it swung slowly back on Dr. Heathcote's tall figure. Barbara darted after him in a moment, and Norman followed.

"Daddie, I want to speak to you."

"Ah, is that you, Bab?" returned her father, smiling at her. "Wait a moment: I've got a message for Norman. Norman, Miss Vokes says——"

"Ah, Daddie, wait a moment, you must hear me first. Do you know, Dad, I went into Susan Moggs's cottage, and she's got the fever; and Nest attended to her while I held the baby, and Norman found us, and he is so angry; and you told me not, and I remembered it just before I went in." And Bab paused, ruddy and breathless, all her sullenness gone.

"You disobeyed me, Barbara; you remembered that I told you not to go, did you say?"

"Yes, perfectly," she admitted frankly. "'Circumstances alter cases,' I said to myself, and I went in."

"You did very wrong, Bab—very wrong indeed," replied Dr. Heathcote gravely; and he said no more: such complete honesty disarmed him.

"Would you believe it, sir," struck in Norman, "that I found them both there in the thick of it? Barbara had the baby in her arms, as she said, and Nest was sitting by the bedside. They had unstopped the window, to cause a thorough draught; and were both of them looking as white and faint, and no wonder in such an atmosphere,—it was enough to breed a pestilence."

Dr. Heathcote grew a little pale. "You never disobeyed me before," he said in a vexed tone, and his eyes searched the girl's face anxiously. "I thought I could trust you, Bab," he added reproachfully; "you knew my wishes, it seems, only to disregard them."

Barbara hung her head. "It was very wrong, Daddie, I see it now; but 'circumstances alter cases,' I thought, and I went in; but I did not enjoy myself," she continued, with a little pout. "I couldn't help feeling frightened and thinking of you all the time, and about the ravens that pecked out the eyes of disobedient children. I did indeed, Daddie."

The Doctor smiled sadly.

"You see, you had no right to exercise your private judgment in the matter," said Norman severely. "You have given us all a fright, Barbara, by your self-will."

She turned from him a little sulkily. "I was not talking to you, Norman," she said; and then

she gave her father a penitent hug. "Bab's sorry, Daddie."

"So am I, my child."

"And she will never do it again till the next time; and not even then, if you don't like."

"I believe you, Barbara."

"And you'll trust me again?" she pleaded, still clinging to him.

The doctor nodded gravely to reassure her; but he sighed a little, and then she went in. She had never once looked at Dr. Strath.

But, coming down afterwards into the harlequin-room, she found him standing by the window, and evidently waiting for her; it was so evident, indeed, that she took up a book and began to read. He came towards her in a moment.

"I was waiting to say good night, Barbara."

"Oh, good night, Norman;" and she put down her book in a great demonstration of hurry, and shook hands; but still he did not go.

"Why were you too proud to own to me that you were in the wrong?" he said, detaining her as she stood beside him.

She glanced up at him in surprise, and then her tone changed; he was so hurt, so much in earnest, that her ill-humor vanished.

"You did not give me the opportunity; you were so cross, Norman. Besides," with a little

toss of her head, "you had no right to question me so."

"No right, Barbara?"

"No," she replied, decisively; "certainly, no right to lecture me as you did."

"Then I am no longer Bab's friend," and he dropped her hand quickly and moved away; but Barbara was frightened into penitence again, and ran after him.

"Norman, what is the matter with you to-night? Why do you take me up so? Bab will never give up her friend."

"Never, Barbara?"

"Oh no, never!" she repeated, pressing closer to him. He almost drew her towards him; his face worked, his whole manner changed, he seemed about to say something, when St. Ronans suddenly walked in.

CHAPTER VII.

BAB'S STORY.

"She is of so free, so kind, so apt, so blessed a disposition,
She holds it a vice in her goodness not to do more than she is requested."—*Shakspeare.*

"Falsehood, cowardice, and poor descent,
Three things that women highly hold in hate."—*Ibid.*

It was some days since the events narrated in the last chapter. Quiet, plodding days they were to Barbara, only enlivened by a longer chat than usual with St. Ronans, or a few kind words from Norman; but she was working steadily at her painting now, and making no little progress, in spite of her young master's lax discipline. Indeed, he began to regard her efforts with secret surprise and almost reverence. "My pupil will astonish us all one of these days," he observed to Dr. Strath; but Dr. Strath merely nodded.

Barbara went to the cottage at Bex Hill regularly. It was part of that doctrine of works which she had so eagerly embraced; and if only she could have felt that her visits were a comfort to the now dying

woman, she would have been perfectly contented, but in her inner consciousness she knew that such was not the case. Mrs. Jackson used to listen to her patiently, and try and be grateful for the crumbs vouchsafed; but that she yearned for something stronger and sweeter than Barbara could give her was evident, from the way in which she begged her to come often, and bring Nest. Barbara's jealous self-sufficiency faded before the awful responsibility of a fast approaching death-bed, and at her urgent entreaty Nest became the constant companion of her daily visits.

One evening the two girls were returning from Mrs. Jackson's. Barbara was in high spirits, but Nest was grave and more than usually silent. She had heard that day that Susan Moggs was dead, and she was filled with compunction at the thoughtlessness which had led her friend and herself into so much danger. Barbara rallied her in vain. "You are so triste, ma chère; you quite oppress me." And then she went on chattering gaily about the picture she was painting for her father, and which was intended as a surprise for his birthday. "It is to be a glimpse of the pine-woods, Nest, just as we saw them that evening at sunset; and the only figure is to be a boy gathering faggots. St. Ronans says it will be my best picture."

"Yes," answered Nest, wearily. She had a jaded

look, as though in pain; and dragged herself along almost with difficulty. They had had a long, hot walk, and the room at Mrs. Jackson's, though perfectly clean, had seemed close and oppressive; added to which Barbara had thoughtlessly chosen the longest way round, hoping to meet Leigh, as she said, forgetting that Nest—never a good walker at any time—had been ailing and out of sorts for the last week or two; for Barbara, as is often the case with robust people, had little sympathy for the small ailments of others.

She trotted along, therefore, at her usual pace, talking incessantly, and every now and then grumbling at Nest's want of interest.

"You walk so fast, Barbara," she said once, rather feebly. Bab slackened her steps with visible impatience, but talked louder than ever: she was repeating an excellent joke. Presently she set off at a tangent again, trotting hard, as Leigh called it.

Suddenly Nest put out her hand and felt for her. "Oh, Barbara! I'm so giddy," she cried. "The trees are all walking, and the roads—and——" but she never finished her sentence, for Bab caught her just as she was falling.

"I had her under the hedge in a twinkling," said Barbara, in her graphic way, when she narrated this little episode afterwards. "The horse was coming along at a furious pace, quite a mad gallop, and in

another minute she must have been under the hoofs, if it hadn't been for my presence of mind. I don't, of course, wish to make myself out a heroine," finished Barbara, modestly; "but I think, when a person has saved three lives only by her readiness and presence of mind, she may be said to be of more consequence than Miss Vokes, who after all is only a 'charitable charwoman.'"

"Never mind Miss Vokes," cried Connie. "You are dreadfully irrelevant, Barbara. Whose horse was coming along—Norman's?"

"Norman's!—of course not. It was Geoffrey's—Geoffrey, of all people you know; and—and——" but here we must leave Barbara to finish her narrative in her own way, and resume our own. Barbara had heard the sound of horses' hoofs, but she had no idea it was Sir Geoffrey till he had dismounted and come up to them with his horse's bridle over his arm.

"Good gracious! is that you, Barbara? And who have you got there in the ditch?" And then he stopped, troubled at the ghastly face before him. Barbara was almost as pale as Nest; but she was down upon him in a moment. "Take that great black brute away—no, she's brown. I did not put her under the hedge to be trampled on. Good gracious me, Geoffrey!"—with a little scream—"do back her into the road."

"She's like a lamb, but for her play," he returned, half angrily. "Here, slip your arm through the bridle, Barbara, while I lift up this poor child. It's a faint, that's what 'tis. So-ho! my lady, stand steady. Now, Barbara."

"Well, I'm sure!" returned Barbara. She was shaking in every limb, and terribly frightened; but she did as she was told for all that, while Geoffrey gathered up poor Nest tenderly in his arms out of her uncomfortable couch of weeds and dock-nettle.

"I'll take her to my mother,—we're just by the park gates. Come along, Barbara."

"Oh, it's all very well saying come along," retorted Barbara, with chattering teeth. "Woa, woa! She's backing terribly, Geoffrey: she will drag me all the way to Durnford. Woa, woa! I say."

"Don't pull at her like that, Barbara. What are you doing? She's playful, that's what she is. Steady! So-ho, Lady-bird, so-ho!"

"So-ho!" echoed Barbara, pleadingly, not knowing what magic there might be in these sounds. Lady-bird ceased to strain so violently, and turned round and looked Barbara in the face, throwing up her hind legs pleasantly, and evidently prepared for a game, proceedings which terrified Barbara exceedingly; but Geoffrey was already striding on at a furious pace and she and her strange companion must follow him. "We can only die once," said Bab, with sublime re-

signation, as Lady-bird's eccentric curvetings brought her out into the middle of the road. "It will sound bad though,—Barbara Heathcote, a victim to the thoughtlessness of her brother-in-law! Let me get my arm out.' Woa! Oh, good gracious!" But Barbara could add no more. Lady-bird had lost sight of her master, and broke into a cheerful canter after him, dragging the luckless Barbara with her, and never stopping till they were at the hall door itself. "If ever I turn groom again!" said Barbara, crimson and breathless from the hardest run she had ever had in her life. "Where's everybody, and what have they done with her? There are footsteps on the new gravel round to the left," she argued shrewdly; "they must be your tracks, Master Geoffrey: anyhow I'll follow them."

Hunsden Park, as it was called, was a bare, dreary-looking place, being nothing more nor less than half-a-dozen fields thrown into one; and the Hall itself, a great overgrown cottage, built of grey stone, much defaced and blackened by age. There was no pretension to style, certainly not to ornament. The whole place was barren; the gardens showy and without taste. But it was Lady Hunsden's one ambition that Geoffrey should build a new house. He had given in to her lately, and the works were already commenced; but, as the new site was only a little removed from the old, the heaps of red clay and

wilderness of bricks and stones did not add much to the cheerfulness of the outside prospect. Inside it was better. Lady Hunsden had made the most of the dark, low rooms, and had succeeded in giving them an air of old fashioned comfort, which went far to redeem their general tastelessness.

Barbara was right in her surmise that Geoffrey had gone round to the back, he had nearly startled his mother into fits by stepping suddenly through the window of her parlor with his strange burden.

Barbara found her still standing open-mouthed with bewilderment, and Nest laid on the sofa, trying to speak, with closed eyes, while Geoffrey's huge form reared up against the mantelpiece, looking as though a feather would knock him over.

"Bless us and save us!" cried the good lady "and here's another!" and Lady Hunsden looked round for her spectacles.

"It's only Barbara, mother," called out Geoffrey, impatiently. "You were going to call Hickson, you know. Hickson will tell us what to do with the poor child." He rang the bell violently, and stooped over the sofa, putting back the long heavy hair from her face with his great hand.

"I am better," whispered Nest. "Is that you, Barbara?—where have you been?"

"Geoffrey knows," returned Barbara, with a withering glance as she knelt down by Nest. "Don't

talk, dear; you must lie quiet. Some one must give her some brandy-and-water, you know," she continued, with a little assumption of command. "Wine is out of the question—never mind gentility. I am a doctor's daughter, you know, Lady Hunsden. A little brandy-and-water!"

"Hear her!" cried Lady Hunsden, admiringly; "but we had better wait for Hickson,—Hickson will know;" and she patted her satin gown approvingly, and nodded to her son. "Young things will be young things, after all. We'll wait for Hickson."

A brisk, fussy little woman was Lady Hunsden. But there, don't be afraid, I am not going to describe her; it would not be in accordance with our compact in the first chapter, you know; but there are just two peculiarities I must notice that will make you see her at once: she wore a glossy chestnut front and a velvet bandeau. Do you like glossy fronts and bandeaux?—I don't; but that is not to the point. Lady Hunsden wore a diamond star in hers on grand occasions, and a cap that was like a field of wild flowers—poppies, corn-flowers, etc.; and sometimes they shone with mimic globules of dew. These caps always went down to Hickson's afterwards: they made quite a commotion, I can tell you, in the servants' hall.

It had been said by some unkindly tongue in the neighborhood, that Lady Hunsden spoke three words

to every one else's one, and that the third was always "Hickson." However that might be, she was certainly her ladyship's factotum. She came up presently,—a stout, sleepy-looking woman, with a blond front and a satin gown like Lady Hunsden's, with a face of impenetrable stolidity.

"Hickson, this young lady is faint; she looks fluttered still, poor soul. Your master, Sir Geoffrey, carried her home. What shall we give her?" Lady Hunsden usually spoke with breaks or pauses, sometimes ruminating, chiefly asthmatical.

"Brandy-and-water, my leddy," said Hickson, stolidly.

Barbara clapped her hands.

"A little weak, directly, Geoffrey. There, poor dear!" as Sir Geoffrey tenderly administered the dose. "Well, what next, Hickson?"

"Put her to bed, my leddy," continued Hickson, after a brief but keen survey out of her watery blue eyes.

"Yes, truly; and then, Hickson?"

"Send for the doctor, my leddy, and," with a flutter of her cap-strings, "send sharp."

"You hear what she says, mother," said Geoffrey, who was pawing round the sofa like an unwieldy horse. "Which room, Mrs. Hickson?—quick, lead the way." And before his mother could interfere, he had taken up Nest in his arms again, and was follow-

ing Mrs. Hickson's ponderous walk, Barbara bringing up a slow trot behind him.

Barbara did not want to laugh, but it was all so funny as she trundled after Geoffrey up the low dark stairs, with the blond front bobbing up before them; and then she found herself in a queer-shaped room, with a great hideous bed, with blue dragons grimacing all over the curtains, and a high black wardrobe that shone like a mirror. The whole place had a sweet, fusty smell about it. Geoffrey laid his light burden down on the bed; her long hair swept over his cheek: his face was flushed; his deep voice had an odd break in it. "I am going for the doctor, Barbara," he said: "stay with her." Barbara nodded, and presently she and Mrs. Hickson had plenty to do. They got her to bed at last, after an argument on Barbara's part, and one or two flares-up. Hickson did the greatest part of it, however, and proved herself as strong as a lion. Barbara was a little helpless, but full of bustle.

"There, how do you feel, dear?" she said at last, patting up the soft pillows, and leaning over her. "You're comfortable, you're better, are you not?"

"I don't know," replied Nest, hesitating: "the giddiness is gone, but my limbs ache so; and feel how hot my hands are. Barbara," she continued, seriously, "Susan Moggs is dead, do you think I have the fever?"

"Fever? stuff, nonsense!" But a cold tremor ran

through Barbara. "You must not get these fancies Nest, it's wrong. You've had too long a walk, and were faint. It is very wicked of her to talk like this, Hickson, is it not?"

Hickson, who was folding up some clothes, advanced with the promptitude of an elephant.

"You must not talk to her, Miss Heathcote. You had better go down to my leddy. She ought to go to sleep after that brandy and water;" and Hickson left the room.

"Oh, I don't want to go to sleep," said Nest, smiling faintly. "Don't go, Barbara. What a dear old room this is! Look at that dragon china, and these queer oval-shaped miniatures over the fireplace. Count them, Bab dear."

"Five-and-twenty," returned Barbara, correctly.

"How funny! They are all little boys with frills, are they not? And what crooked legs all the chairs have; and this coverlet is satin patchwork, just look! and oh, how comfortable this bed is—like a nest of feathers;" and she gave a great sigh of content. "Don't fret, Barbara, I shan't mind if I am ill here, in this dear old place."

"You are not going to be ill," said Barbara, stroking her face; but she felt a great twinge of pain, in spite of herself. Nest did look very ill, certainly.

By-and-by Lady Hunsden came up, and then Dr. Strath. He looked at Barbara as he entered, and in

a low tone bade her go down. In the dusky hall she came upon Geoffrey, walking restlessly up and down. He seemed glad to see her, however, and made her comfortable in his rough hospitable way, putting her in his mother's chair, and giving her a footstool.

"For you're tired, Barbara, and have had a fright, so we must take care of you. Lady H.—my mother I mean—has ordered up some tea, and you must drink it and be quiet;" and he resumed his restless walk up and down.

"Thank you, Geoffrey," she returned, touched at his new thoughtfulness; and this was all that passed between them. But Barbara remembered that evening long afterwards. It fitted into her memory like a picture in an old-fashioned setting—Geoffrey's restless strides; the room, a little faded perhaps, but softly lit with wax candles in silver sconces; dark wainscoting, and old portraits in dim oval frames; a gleaming tea-equipage, a tiger rug, with a lean, grey old hound stretched out on it; a sweet smell of sandal wood, silence, and waiting drowsiness. It was quite a relief when Dr. Strath came down, with his quick decided voice and tread.

He went up to Sir Geoffrey at once, and the two men had a little talk at the other end of the room.

Barbara could not hear a word that they said, but

she noticed that Geoffrey looked pale and jaded, and that he could not keep his hands still. "Oh, ho!" thought Barbara; and then she got impatient and yawned, and tried to make friends with the grizzly hound, but he growled and snarled at her toothlessly. "Norman," she called out at last, and then they came to her. "Is it the fever, Norman?"

"Why, yes," he returned, rather reluctantly, "I am afraid it is. Only a slight touch, I hope. Nest has a pretty fair constitution, and looks weaker than she really is."

"Will you take a message from me to Hester?" interrupted Bab quickly.

"A dozen, if you like," he returned, smiling down upon her. "As regards this one, however——" but she would not let him finish his sentence.

"I shall want her to send up some things for me to-morrow—a dress, and some other items. I will put them down on paper. Lady Hunsden can lend me what I want to-night."

"Softly, softly, my dear child," returned Dr. Strath; and then very kindly, though with some difficulty, he made her understand that her services were not required; that Lady Hunsden would be nurse, and Hickson under her; and that he could not, no, he could not hear of her running any further risks. If she got her father's consent, well and good; but that he must take the liberty of insisting that she should

return home at once, leaving Nest to the care of her kind friends.

It would not have been Barbara to yield quietly to this sensible proposition. She knew that she had no experience and no capacity for nursing; that she would probably be as helpless in a sick room as a fish out of water; but, true to her nature, she had a long argument with Norman, and turned so very sulky at her non-success, that Geoffrey was obliged to come to the rescue. He walked with her as far as the park gates, dilating on his mother's great skill and experience in all matters pertaining to illness, and begging Barbara to set her mind quite at ease about her friend. But she became so doleful, and argued out Susan Moggs's case with such dismal prognostications concerning Nest, that he left them abruptly; and Norman took her to task severely for talking such nonsense, and making that good Geoffrey so uncomfortable.

"What is it to him, whether Nest lives or dies?" she retorted fiercely; and after that they were quite silent. Barbara was inclined to be a little restive when she got home. She became satirical, and wanted to preserve a strict quarantine in her own den for the next few days, and begged her father to allow her to go up to one of the London hospitals, and be properly trained for nursing, that she might be allowed in future to attend her friends' death-beds. Here she broke down, and became rather hysterical; but they were

all very kind, and petted her, and Dr. Heathcote spoke warmly of his Barbara's ready presence of mind. And so this little whimsical being, who, as St. Ronans averred, was half child, half woman, and half brownie, dried up her eyes, forgot her dolefulness, and took off Lady H. to the life, with the delicious comic gravity that was one of Bab's chief charms. But she cried herself to sleep for all that, and for the next day or two was so subdued and out of spirits, that Hester grew secretly alarmed, and told her father that she was afraid that Barbara was going to fall ill too. Barbara rather thought so herself.

But after a few days she had other causes of disquiet, and had forgot all about it. The illness, as it turned out, was a very light one—a low sort of fever, not infectious; and so she was soon admitted to Nest's room. She found her very weak, but quite happy, with a new sunshiny look on her face, and perfectly surrounded by flowers.

Barbara got into the habit of going up to Hunsden Park daily, and stopping for hours. These visits became a sort of necessity to her. She often used to break off in the middle of painting, an hour before the usual time, that she might go and sit with Nest—a piece of independent action, by-the-bye, that provoked St. Ronans excessively. The lessons did not go on quite so smoothly at this time; he was critical, not to say captious, found fault with her best work, and was

terribly aggravating. But he looked ill, and said he was suffering from heat, and so she bore with him. Nest used to give her a sweet welcoming smile. Geoffrey was in the habit of carrying her every morning to a sunny room, Lady Hunsden's dressing-room, which looked over the park, and pillowing her up on a great couch at the open window. Barbara used to find him there most mornings, sometimes with his mother, and sometimes alone. He used to hover about the two girls incessantly. Barbara opened her eyes rather widely at the dainty fruit and flowers that came up with the master's compliments. Nest colored a little, but she took it all very quietly. Barbara fancied that she grew to listen for his footsteps, and always seemed a little distrait and restless, if the morning passed without his visit. But they both wondered at Barbara's gravity, and with reason. Barbara said very little, but she noticed everything. She was working out a problem in her solid way; and, to do her justice, the solution was making her miserable. She was puzzling over Geoffrey's altered looks and ways, and the result that she arrived at was not a pleasant one. She used to come home from those visits as sober as a little judge, and singularly reticent on all that had passed during the day. "Was Nest better?" "Oh yes, much better, but still weak. Lady Hunsden had been sitting with them. Nest was growing quite fond of her, and she of Nest. She was a dear, fussy

old soul," and so on; but not a word about Geoffrey or the flowers, though perhaps he had been with them half the day, dropping his loud voice till it was soft enough for a sick room, and handling Nest's pillows with a hand which, despite its size, was as gentle as a woman's. No, Barbara told none of these things; neither did Geoffrey, when he came up of an evening to pay dutiful visits to his betrothed. But Barbara had a kind of fancy that he shunned her eyes, and deported himself more awkwardly than ever before her; but, secretly exasperated as she was, her words were perfectly smooth to him; and no one, he least of all, detected the two sentinels in Bab's eyes.

But every night, as she laid her head on the pillow, she used to say the same thing, "I'm a woman of my word, and I hate lies;" and once, very fiercely, "You are a hypocrite, Geoffrey;" and then she went to bed.

But one day she noticed Geoffrey's hand touched Nest's long hair, half fondling and half sad; and such a light gleamed from the two sentinels! and then she went home in a little fury.

And, happening to wake up in the middle of the night, she apostrophised the darkness, and sat up cramped and hot, rubbing the sleep out of her eyes. "Half the world tells lies," she said, "and the other half is cracked. What a damaged old world it is! But I'm a woman of my word, and I'll stick to it."

And then she made up her mind, and felt a heroine, and lay down flat and rehearsed her part, and made a sort of a vow in a moon-struck way. "Hester is my sister, and Nest is my friend. You're a fool, Geoffrey, and I'm another; but some one shall tell the truth for the honor of the Heathcotes; and bless dear old Daddie, wouldn't he make a mess of it!" She laughed with wet eyes, and then composed herself; and when she had entirely rehearsed her part, she had a long nap, and woke refreshed.

She quarrelled with St. Ronans all the morning, and made herself very disagreeable. He called her Bab the wrangler, and refused to have anything more to do with her. "You've had a sunstroke, St. Ronans; that's what the matter with you!" Barbara politely assured him. "There's a want of consistency in your expressions;" and then she went up to Hunsden Park.

She found Geoffrey, as usual, in the morning room; he was teaching his dog a new trick, laying down a biscuit with an interdict. "Trust—paid for," said Geoffrey. Nest laughed softly. She had roses in her belt and in her cheeks, and one great one in her hands, and her dress was white. With her long pale hair and great shining eyes, she looked pretty, almost brilliant. Not for long, however.

Barbara leaned over her and kissed her; but her eyes were on Geoffrey.

"Why, how well you look, Nest! and what a color you have! Norman said yesterday that you were strong enough to go home; and I believe he means to tell Lady Strath so."

"Did he say that?" asked Nest nervously. She was pulling the roses to pieces in her hands, and her face seemed quite wan and grey. Geoffrey gave Barbara a queer look, and then he stooped over Nest, taking her hand quickly, almost fiercely: the poor fellow was crimson to his forehead. "You are not strong, Nest; you cannot go home yet. My mother shall speak to Lady Strath. I will not have you troubled like this;" and he gave Barbara an angry glance. And this from easy-tempered Geoffrey!

Nest tried to smile up in his face, but the effort was pitiable. "Oh, I must go, Sir Geoffrey, if my mother comes for me. Do you think she will to-day, Barbara?"

"No, not to-day," answered Barbara. She was watching them as one fascinated.

"One day more, then," cried Nest, with a little quiver. "Oh, I have been so happy here! Lady Hunsden has been so good to me; and—and——." And here, weak and ill as she was, she broke down.

"Don't do that," said Geoffrey, with a great break in his voice—"don't, Nest;" but Barbara pushed past him, and took Nest in her arms.

"Go and fetch her some wine," said Barbara cheer-

fully. "I spoke too hastily, and she feels weak, and, like all invalids, cannot bear the thought of being moved. There, don't cry any more, you spoiled child;" and she hushed Nest with a bright womanliness that was quaint in Barbara. It worked wonders. Nest ceased the weak sobbing, and lay quite still; only, it pained Barbara to see how like a broken lily she looked all the rest of the day.

And Geoffrey—well Geoffrey never took his eyes off her; and there was a sullen, hungry look on the man's face that frightened Barbara; but she wouldn't seem to notice it. So she did her part, laughed, and chatted, and read, till the time came for her to return home, and then she summoned him to attend her. "Come, Geoffrey, come; you know Hester expects us."

"But don't you think, Barbara, that—can't you tell her that I will come to-morrow?"

"No, indeed," returned Barbara, hastily. "What in the world are you thinking about, Geoffrey? I won't stir a step without you. Excuses, indeed!"

"Do go," said Nest, timidly;" and he rose immediately. But, if it had been left for him, they would have had a silent walk home. Nothing was further from Barbara's intention, however; so she attacked him the instant they left the house.

"Do you like stories, Geoffrey?"

"Stories! Humph—yes. I liked that one you were reading to-day."

"Oh! I was not thinking about that. I am reading another book just now, Geoffrey, with such a funny plot. I don't know that it is particularly clever. It is exciting though, rather; and, what makes it more interesting, it is drawn from the life."

"What's it called?" asked Geoffrey, with indifference.

"'Cross Purposes,'" returned Barbara, promptly. "It's a puzzling sort of book, too."

"Is it long?" he asked, in the same tone, and endeavoring to suppress a yawn.

"Well, no, I don't suppose you would call it long; but then I am only in the middle of the second volume. The hero is very well drawn. He is a stupid, good sort of man, without much brains; but the author or authoress, whichever it is, has made rather a mistake. He is evidently intended for a very virtuous sort of person—goody-good, as the children say,—and he's an awful hypocrite."

"Is he? Dear now, how very droll, Barbara. It can't be a nice book, I should think." Geoffrey was trying to rouse himself, and take a polite interest.

"Oh yes, it is," returned Barbara, quickly, "a very nice book, only rather tiresome. Hester, there, can't read it; but, then, Hester was always slow—I mean, particular. I was going to tell you about the

plot. The hero reminds me so of you, Geoffrey." Geoffrey was watching his dogs, and did not answer.

"He was fond of sports and all that, and was very rich; and he got engaged to a beautiful girl, very much below him in rank, and quite penniless. But still she was so good and beautiful," continued Barbara, warmly, "that she might have married a prince."

Geoffrey brought his attention to bear on this part of the subject. "Then, I suppose they married and lived very happily ever afterwards," he said, laughing nervously.

"Oh! no," exclaimed Barbara, quickly. "You remember I am only in the middle of the second volume, and affairs are getting rather complicated just now. I don't think they will marry after all."

"Not marry, Barbara?"

"No; that is just the point. You see he did not love her. Oh! I forgot I have not told you that yet. Well, but you can see all through he does not love her. He thinks her beautiful and good, and all that; but he does not want to make her his wife."

"But that is not very natural," observed Geoffrey, shrewdly. "I think it a stupid book, Barbara."

"Well, so do I," she admitted, frankly,—"a very stupid book, Geoffrey Hunsden, "and a pack of lies: but there, let me get on. This goody-good hypocrite,

in reality, loves another girl, but he has not the honesty to tell either her or his betrothed; and so I foresee, if no lady helps him, they will all three be made miserable. This other girl is far inferior to his betrothed in everything but goodness. She is little, and plain, and sickly," here Sir Geoffrey started, "and rather lame—limps a little, you know; and the man must be bewitched to leave the other one for her; but he can see no fault in her,—a sure sign of love," argued Barbara, sagaciously. She could not catch a glimpse of his face now, it was so averted. "The sister of his betrothed," continued Barbara, after a little pause, "saw how it was, and pitied him from her heart. She hated lies, did this sister, and deceit and hypocrisy, and all that; and so she made up her mind that if no one else would speak the truth she would; and so she told him what I am telling you, Geoffrey." And here Barbara broke down altogether, and clasped his arm with a little sob.

No answer: he only strode on faster, striking his knotted stick on the ground fiercely. But those long-drawn breaths, what did they signify?

"You are not angry, Geoffrey? Don't be angry with poor little Bab."

He turned round and faced her immediately, and then indeed she was startled. The veins of his forehead were swollen like thick cords, and his ruddy face was quite pale.

"I am not very clever, Barbara. You hit me off well there,—your hero with not much brains; but I think I see the drift of your story."

"And you are not vexed, Geoffrey?"

"Vexed!—pooh, nonsense! A man who is as miserable as I am, has no reason to be vexed with trifles."

"Why need you be miserable? Oh, Geoffrey! dear old Geoff! I do so want to help you. Why need you be miserable?"

He looked at her in a bewildered sort of way. "Don't you understand?—I thought you did from your story. Surely, if I love Nest, it must make me miserable to marry Hester."

"You shall not marry our Hester," said Barbara, proudly. And then checking herself, "But are you sure—are you very sure, Geoffrey, that you do love Nest?"

"Quite sure," he returned, in a manly, decided way, that she had never seen in him before; and, indeed, the whole man seemed changed. "It may seem queer and unnatural to you, Barbara—it would to me in any other fellow—that I should care for any girl when I have a chance with Hester; and, 'pon honour, she's a beautiful creature, and no mistake. But I can only say that it is so."

"But why?" persisted Barbara, curiously. She wanted to solve this most inexplicable problem sorely.

"After all it may be only a fancy." He shook his head.

"I don't understand it, 'pon honour, Barbara. I always admired Hester, and all that, and thought I was fond of her; but a man shouldn't be afraid of the woman he is going to marry."

"Of course not. What an absurd idea! Why ever should you be afraid of Hester?"

"I don't know: she seems so much above me; I always feel like a school-boy in her presence."

"Well done, Geoffrey!" and Barbara could hardly forbear clapping her hands.

"I am never afraid of Nest," he went on, sadly, and softening his big voice. "Though she is like a saint in goodness, she never makes one feel abashed; she is so little, and tender, and weak. Such a young thing, and so unhappy! Barbara, I don't think any mischief would have been done but for those visits to St. Ronans."

"How do you mean?" asked Barbara. She was painfully trying to adapt her trot to his monstrous strides. She found out at last two and a half steps would just do it; but it interrupted her rather, and distracted her attention. But Geoffrey's tongue, once thoroughly loosed, went on: the big cords were not quite so tight now.

"Why, you see I found out there how lonely the dear little thing was, and how her mother put upon

her. Now I never could stand oppression—never; it makes me mad. I thought I only felt pity for her, and all that, and that I was true to Hester; and all the while she was creeping into my heart. It is such a timid, gentle little bird, Barbara, but I want to protect it, and take it home." His voice was quite hoarse. The rough outer nature of the man had dropped off like a husk; and what a good, kindly heart was beneath it! Barbara felt genuine respect and affection for him.

"You're a noble creature, Geoffrey."

"And yet you called me a hypocrite just now."

Barbara winced. Somehow her speeches never sounded so well from any other mouth as from her own.

"Only as long as you refuse to tell the truth. It is cowardly to keep it back—mean, dishonorable to Hester."

"What am I to do?" he said, hopelessly. "My mother has talked me into it, and now it is too late. I cannot go back from my word."

"Perhaps not," returned Barbara, haughtily. "You must put the true state of the case before Hester, and if she be willing to marry you, of course she must do so; but to tell you a bit of my mind," continued Bab, frankly, "I think she would rather cut her throat first than so demean herself; and if she wouldn't, I would do it for her, and with pleasure," nodding fiercely.

"She will be awfully angry. It's all very well to tell me to do it; but however I am to screw my courage up!" and Sir Geoffrey looked about as miserable as a man could look.

"Well, you see that's your affair. I don't mean to be unfeeling, Geoffrey; but you've got yourself into this scrape, and you owe it to Nest to get her and yourself out of it as quickly as you can. I don't think I can help you there, because, though Nest is my friend, Hester is my sister."

It was very odd that Barbara always spoke of Geoffrey's affection for Nest, and never seemed to question Nest's for Geoffrey. She seemed to guess, intuitively, that there could be no doubt of that Geoffrey, on his side, already assumed it as a fact.

Barbara's dignified speech acted like a spur, however.

"I beg your pardon, Barbara. Of course, I see; only I'm such a slow fellow. I must think over this, and see what is best to be done. You won't mind my turning back, will you? I don't feel like talking any more."

"But what am I to say to Hester?" exclaimed Barbara. She was rather alarmed at the success of her manœuvres, but very proud of it, too. "She expects you, Geoffrey, and it will look so funny my going in without you."

"Tell her I will look in later in the evening. Yes,

that will do; but how on earth?" he muttered, and then turned on his heel abruptly. Barbara stood and watched him till he was out of sight.

"Poor Geoffrey!" she observed to herself, "you are in a nice scrape. I wonder what Hester will think of her poor little rival."

CHAPTER VIII.

THE CROSS CROWNED.

"My soul is like a fragile flower,
Whose cup the sky so full has filled
With dew, that earthwards it must lower
Its head, till half the wealth is spilled.

"Thus hast thou showered on me, my heaven,
Such glorious bliss without alloy;
My heart, it bends 'neath bounty given,
And overbrims in tears of joy."—*Claude Lake.*

BARBARA felt quite a heroine when she returned home. Heroines always get involved in a great many difficulties, she thought, and are always extricating themselves and other people in a most marvellous way. She felt very uncomfortable, of course; but, then, no doubt other heroines felt themselves uncomfortable too. An inconvenient notion seized her, that Hester might not be specially grateful to her for her interference. "Small meddlings are dangerous things," sighed Bab, coining a new proverb for the occasion; but she was very much inflated, for all that,—a feeling, by-the-bye, that she lost the moment she found herself in Hester's presence. Hester looked up, and greeted

her quite brightly when she entered. She was working, as usual, in her favorite place by the open window; and though she confessed to some little disappointment at not seeing Geoffrey with her, she admitted the stammered-out excuse very amiably. "Engaged! what has kept him, I wonder? Well, never mind, if he be coming by-and-by," she said cheerfully. Sit down, Barbara—how hot and tired you look, child—and tell me if you have had a pleasant day."

"That depends on what you call pleasant," returned Barbara shortly; "the first part was tolerable;" and then she sat down all of a heap, as usual, and wrinkled her forehead frightfully. In such moods Barbara was not handsome; her detractors would have gone so far as to call her ugly; but we are getting fond of Bab now, faults, fancies, and all, and cannot permit such a suggestion. But she looked rather like an impish-looking baby, and that was the fact. No one need have envied Barbara her nice easy chair, softly padded as it was, and with springs to boot. She was sitting literally on thorns, eyeing Hester askance with troubled eyes. "How very cheerful she is," groaned poor Bab; "so very cheerful—talkative too. I wish I were out of this;" and she felt like a conspirator plotting against her sister's happiness. Could ever any of her defunct heroines have felt so very uncomfortable?

"You are tired, Barbara," repeated Hester, plea-

santly, as she folded up her work and laid it aside. Bab cleared her throat, and said "Yes," and then nodded half-a-dozen times with no particular purpose. Hester's hands remained inactive; she seemed thinking, turning something over in her mind with quiet gravity.

"Where is Connie?" asked Barbara, restlessly. She did not like talking, but it was worse to be silent.

"Connie is spending the evening at the Ruperts'. They sent in for her, quite suddenly; a little tea-party on the lawn. They wanted you too, Barbara."

"Oh," said Barbara; and then again there was silence.

"Yes, she was so pleased to go, dear little thing; but, Barbara, now we are alone together, I want to speak to you about something that has been on my mind lately. You remember the talk we had that night?" she continued, hesitating.

"What talk, Essie?"

"Why, when you came to my room," she returned—"about Geoffrey; and——"

"Oh yes, I understand. You are never going to talk about that," exclaimed Barbara, in infinite distress. "What I thought then, I think now, and with tenfold more reason."

Hester opened her grey eyes widely, too much astonished to speak. Barbara went on in desperation.

"I have not altered my mind a bit, Essie. I think

it still a mistake, the one great mistake of your life. You will never be happy, never!" Hester looked a little offended.

"You are excited, Barbara; you will not hear what I have to say. You found me in trouble that night, and I thought you might like to know that I am quite content now." And then, as the natural sweetness of her disposition asserted itself, "I tell you this, because you spoke the truth to me in all kindness."

"I am glad you are content," replied Barbara with a sigh.

"Yes," said Hester steadily, "I think I have done wisely. I know myself and my own nature. He is a good man, one whom I can respect, one whom I really like. I am sure he will make me happy."

"Do you love him, Essie?" and Barbara leant forward breathlessly for the answer. A flush crossed Hester's fair face for a moment, as though she half resented the question. She looked at Barbara doubtfully; her earnestness must have touched her, for her manner changed and softened.

"I am not marrying for love," she said quickly; you know that as well as I, Barbara. Once I hoped I should; but now—now—it is impossible."

"Why impossible, Essie?"

"Hush, hush; that is not the question. We were speaking of Geoffrey just now, were we not? Yes, I am sure I am right, Barbara, sure for myself that is

to say, it is my notion that all women ought to marry. Where are we to get our standing, our power, unless we do?" She paused a moment, and went on rapidly, "It is all so narrow here, as I have said before. As Geoffrey's wife, I shall have scope for my energies; a place, power, and plenty of material for good. Yes, yes, it is right for me; it is right for him, too. I shall help him do his duty, as he has never done it yet."

Barbara, with her listening face, never moved, never took her eyes off her sister. Strong dissent was stamped on every feature; but for once she was silent. "What am I to say to her," groaned Barbara. "Oh what blind fools we are; she must have her talk out; but I dare not answer her, or I shall be telling my story over again."

"I was very unhappy that night," continued Hester. "I felt as you did, that such a life would not suit me; but I am more content now. I have grown to esteem Geoffrey; I understand him. When I am his wife, and we are working together, I think I shall feel less lonely than I do here. My life will be fuller, more active, less confined; and who knows"—But here Hester did not finish her sentence, but in the depths of her passionate, but reticent nature, she was saying, "Who knows, whether God may be good to me or not, and in future years I may have a child, a son, for my very own, on whom to set my heart and hopes,

something that I may love before I die." How many another woman, from the hidden depths of her heart, has prayed that same prayer!

Barbara still sat, chin in hand, and watched her with unwinking eyes; but her whole nature rose up in secret rebellion to the cold, clear statement of Hester's views. What a strong hard face it was, despite its beauty! What firmly-closed lips! What a massively cleft chin! What power on the low broad forehead! Bab thought of Nest's tears and flushes, her innocent betrayals of her love in every word, and then she grew mutinous.

"I don't like that working view of marriage," she said, indignantly. "I would rather scrub floors, than think as you do. If you had something to gain from marrying him—for the sake of your family for example—some grand piece of self-renunciation, that should out-do Jephtha's daughter and Iphigenia, I could understand it; but—"

"There, we won't talk of it any more," said Hester, with a little dignity. "You and I are never likely to agree on this subject, and I have taken my course. How late Geoffrey is; he promised to bring the plans for the new house. I want some alterations in the left wing. By the bye, Barbara, you know we have fixed our wedding-day."

"I know no such thing," returned Barbara, with a startled face.

"New Year's Day. Lady Hunsden wished it before, but I said no, I would take up my new life and my new duties with the first day of the year; it is my birthday, too."

"Oh, for gracious sake, don't talk any more," cried Barbara, and she fairly rushed away. It was not dignified in a heroine. She ought to have sat it out, with tightly-interlaced fingers and quivering nerves, in the orthodox manner, instead of jumping up, slamming the door, and stamping up to her own room in that outlandish fashion. And I think a more absurd little image than Barbara looked couldn't be found anywhere, as she sat in the middle of her den, tucked up on the floor, pushing her hot fingers through her hair, and talking to herself. I am not quite sure that she did not stop her ears, as she always did when Connie was in the dentist chair; under a sort of unconscious impression that something—she did not know what—was happening downstairs. "Stuff and rubbish," she called out quite loud, when she had settled herself to her own liking. "I can understand anyone talking crazily when they are in love, but to argue out everything in this lawyer-like fashion, just as though she were only establishing a clothing club, maternity meeting, or washerwomen's class! I declare I have no patience with it."

She repeated this sentence in various forms, much

to Ben's alarm, for he stood by her in a stricken manner, feebly apologising with lolled-out tongue. And then she felt dull, and perched up on the window-seat for a bit. It grew dark presently, at least dusk—sweet summer dusk. She was tired of nearly breaking her neck with trying to reach for a piece of jasmine that provoked her into longing for it. "There's plenty more outside the drawing-room window," she said at last, grumbling, and she went downstairs in a slipshod, guilty manner, and, forgetting all about her errand, walked quietly into the Harlequin room. She was standing staring at them both before she recollected herself.

The lamp was on the table, but Hester was not working beside it. She was standing by the window, with averted face, when Barbara came in; and Geoffrey was near her. He had the same scared paleness when he turned round as when Bab saw him last; in his heavy way he was suffering terribly. Bab saw it all, and then she prepared to retreat.

"Barbara come here!" The harsh tones were Hester's, but only harsh with pain.

Barbara folded her hands behind her and came forward reluctantly. "I did not mean to interrupt you and Geoffrey," she pleaded apologetically.

Hester gave a gesture of impatience. "Never mind the interruption, Barbara; I wish to speak to

you. Sir Geoffrey tells me that I am indebted to you for all this pleasant truth; is it so?"

Barbara stood like Ben, in stricken silence.

"You must answer me," continued Hester quickly. "I am not angry, Barbara. God only knows from what you have saved me—from what a miserable fate, to which my own blindness was hurrying me. I thank you, do you hear? I thank you for what you have done."

There was anger and outraged feeling in her voice —the keen suffering of a proud and slighted woman; but that was all. It gave Barbara courage.

"Be angry with me, Essie; I shall not mind it in the least, and it will do you good. I know I have done nothing wrong; but that does not matter. I only told Geoffrey, as I told you, that he was making a mistake. I was not going to stand by," continued Bab with dignity, "and see him about to marry you, Essie, when he liked another girl better."

"Did I not say just now, I thanked you, Barbara; why waste words? You have saved us both from life-long misery; and is not that a cause for gratitude? Sir Geoffrey, I think we have finished our conversation. I need not detain you further. Remember, you have your full liberty; I have already released you. Miss Strath has more claims on your time now than I." She spoke bitterly, but her position was

humiliating—to such a woman as Hester it was intolerable.

"Is this all you can say to me, Hester?" cried Geoffrey. Poor fellow, how he was suffering. "I have treated you badly; but how can a man answer for himself for two years? I wanted you to marry me before, 'pon honour, I did; but you would not." Then in his straightforward, manly way—"I have offered over and over again to keep my word to you, and to try and forget everything but that you are my plighted wife. It is not too late, Hester, if you will only forgive me." And so great was his pain that he meant, for the moment, what he said; but Hester turned from him with a movement of disdain.

He came up a little closer. "At least wish me God speed. I will not leave you like this, Hester Heathcote, who have been my true friend for so long. No, not till you tell me you forgive me." And he held out his honest hand to her.

Then her pride gave way. Whatever tenderness she felt for the man, found utterance now.

"I have nothing to forgive," she said, hurriedly. "It was I who was in fault. I who should ask to be forgiven. But I was just beginning to like you, Geoffrey. I thought it would all come right; there, go and make Nest happy, for she at least is innocent."

"Promise me that we shall always be friends, Hester," pleaded Geoffrey, and for the first time for

many and many a long month he looked tenderly into her beautiful face.

"Yes, I shall always be your friend; always, do you hear, Geoffrey? There, good-bye; God bless you." Tears sprang to her eyes. "Tell Nest from me, she must make you happy;" and then she quietly moved away, and left him. She had borne herself with what dignity she might, but she could bear it no longer. She had been so sure of him—had built so largely on her future life—that she could scarcely now believe that anything so intolerable had happened to her.

And yet, perhaps, it was the happiest thing that could have befallen Hester Heathcote, for it struck at the stony foundations of her proud and self reliant nature, upon which she had proposed to herself to build a superstructure of works and vain glory for the rest of her life. Now her ambition had got a fatal blow; she had been wounded in a woman's most vulnerable part—that of believing herself beloved—she was to learn that all her hopes, all her intentions—however purely good they might have been—were yet leavened with unlawful leaven, and doomed to be ruthlessly destroyed.

For however desirable it may be to work out good with a clean heart, yet we shall all of us find out one day, that self-imposed duties—undertaken in a wrong spirit, stained with unworthy motives—or wrought only for our own ends, must fail of the promised

blessing; must bring to their doers but a curse, a curse of briars and thorns, disappointment, and the rank weeds of humiliation; seeing that we have not wholly eschewed evil, while cleaving to that which is good.

And so in the stately plan of life which Hester had mapped out for herself—"thus and thus will I do"—was there a conscious flaw that marred it all, the plague-spot of pride,—pride that refused to accept such a narrow way in life, that would do greater and greater deeds, to shine in the eyes of men. Ah! as time went on, and added cares and troubles came upon her, Hester grew to look upon her past ambition as a sin; when she owned to herself that she had fallen from her woman's integrity, and cast a slur upon the glory of her youth; and when all her better nature awoke in its nobility and truth, and the heart of the little child was given to her, and people loved her faded beauty as they had never loved it in its prime. Ah! who that had known her in the days of her brief summer of content, when Arthur Mayhew came to the old house, or, afterwards, during the long strange wooing of Geoffrey Hunsden, would have recognised Hester Heathcote in the gentle, grey-haired woman, whom to know was to love, and whose sweet empire was so boundless over youth and youth's belongings, that it seemed well-nigh marvellous. In later life, when asked by one who had known her how

she could so patiently acquiesce in the fate of loneliness that was decreed to her, and especially in that which is so often the hardest trial to the unmarried woman—the knowledge that the blessing which is not denied to the peasant woman is denied to them,—Hester made answer with a tranquil smile, "God knows that I love children so, that He has given me not one or two, but hundreds. You would smile if you knew how many call me mother, and whom I love as my own." And then, with the sweetness and tenderness that came to her in her later life, "Seeing, therefore, that I am blessed with universal motherhood, how can I be ungrateful for myself, or you for me." Such are the contradictions of human nature,—such the several changes evolved by troubles that seem at first only to provoke a chaos, till, under the transforming Hand, the struggling elements of the soul find natural bounds and outlets. Ah, me!—tread reverently here, for this is holy ground,—how many a "peace, be still" of the great Tranquilliser, and, lo! the fretful, proudly misgoverned youth—so often rudderless on tempestuous seas—suddenly finds itself, after many storms, in the still waters of a strange haven, not such a haven as we would choose, may be,—not the one for which we had planned and striven, but surely the one that is best and safest for us,—a God-fearing, steadfast, middle-age; if without hope, yet certainly without fear.

And yet how youth dreads such an end. Let me die rather, it says. Yes, rather would I die!

The time was long in coming to Hester, but it came at last. At first, as was natural, she brooded over her changed prospects in a gloomy pride that admitted no possibility of sympathy; pity you could not have offered to her. Her father's fierce anger with Geoffrey, Barbara's warm partisanship, Connie's caresses—generally so soothing, seemed alike to her. She neither responded nor rebuked: she would have nothing to say on the subject—nothing.

No one had ever seen Dr. Heathcote so angry before, except once, when Leigh's disgrace was first known; the gentlest of men as he was, he was not devoid of weakness, and perhaps a lurking ambition to see his Hester well married was one of them. As we have said before, he alone knew, or rather guessed, at her old secret; and he had hailed her engagement with Geoffrey as promising the best prospect for her eventual happiness. That he was a baronet, well looking, and well-endowed with everything but cleverness, of course added greatly to the advantage of the match; and as the more he knew of him the better he liked him—and already he was beginning to regard him in some measure as his son—so was the corresponding disappointment when Hester informed him that the engagement was over between them, and that he would always have her with him now, as she would

never marry. Heathcote House was not a very pleasant abode just now, under the influence of the Doctor's wrath; in the first place, being so very rare, it had the effect of a moral earthquake. "When Daddie's angry, you never know where you are," as Barbara remarked candidly. But there was another cause for the Doctor's perturbation than appeared at first sight—but more of that presently; and then, secondly, his anger being a disused and singularly awkward weapon, and not very well wielded by its owner, it was sure to light on the wrong person; and Geoffrey not being in the way, seeing he had forbidden him the house, and Barbara always before him standing well on her defence, it so happened that she had rather a hard life of it, being well beset by the Doctor's missiles, which were flung about on all occasions, and which she bore with argumentative cheerfulness, and a thorough good-humored intention to stand in the breach for as long as he wanted her. "Bravo, Bab," Leigh would say, day after day, "what's up between the Governor and you, and what's become of the sulks?" and Barbara would answer half shrewdly and half comically,—"It makes him sore, Leigh, to see Hester moving about like a statue, and looking so cold and proud at him—he wants her to wake up and make him forget all about it; and he feels cross and testy and bitter, and so he has a hit at Bab." She used to say sometimes to

him of a night, "You have been very cross all day, Daddie, have you not?"

"I am afraid I have, Bab," he would answer, looking relentingly at her, and stroking his grey beard.

"Well, Bab forgives you, only don't go and do it again till the next time, unless—" and then she would come near him, and look at him with her great eyes very softly.

"Unless what, my Barbara?"

"Unless you want to be hugged to death by a little brown bear," she would reply; and after that she always had her way with him. But, in spite of her fun, she carried a very grave face to the studio of a morning.

Nest was back at St. Ronans now. She had bidden very long adieu to her kind hostess. Geoffrey was not there; he had gone off to Scotland for some shooting. She had had many a secret cry over his changed manner, and his cold "good-bye, Miss Strath." He had hardly looked at her either when he shook hands. Could she have offended him? Was he angry with her? The poor creature was nearly breaking her heart over this sudden leave-taking. She pined like some sickly plant, suddenly deprived of sunshine and air; her transient beauty was over. Lady Strath was heard to say more than once, that she never thought before that Nest was quite so plain. Then she grew anxious

about her; the girl seemed to dwindle and droop more every day. Nest, shrinking from notice, said it was the fever, and prayed to be left alone. She wanted no one, not even Barbara. Barbara's health and spirits oppressed her. Aye, it was fever surely, the fever of hopeless love! Nest had her hot fits and her cold fits; her bitter thirstings and parched longings, longings for a voice whose joyous vitality was as a new life to her; for a strong hand and an honest face, which was speedily becoming all her world. She had no hope now. She knew the engagement was broken with Hester. Sunningford was ringing with the news, but she had no suspicion of the true cause. Geoffrey's quick leave-taking, his prolonged absence, and Lady Hunsden's grave face, all combined to make her believe that the affair had given him great pain. Once, she had fancied, he did not like Hester; now she was sure that he did. I think, but for her secret stay, she would have utterly broken down; but even with her entire resignation to what she believed a higher will, sleepless nights and disordered nerves were making her a wraith of herself. Barbara secretly mourned over her; then she grew frightened. One night, after Nest had been talking very earnestly for hours about the joys of Paradise, Barbara sat down and wrote a long letter to Geoffrey, and carried it herself to the post; and what she said in it nobody knows to this day, except Geoffrey. Only, she did

not seem at all surprised, as she was returning from Bex Hill an evening or two afterwards, to see him coming out of the lodge gates in his grey tweed shooting coat, and his face looking as bronzed and healthy as even Geoffrey's could look. He came up to her at a swinging pace, and shook her hands till she called out with pain. "How is she, Barbara?"

Answered Barbara, wincing and looking at her red hands, "Oh dear, oh dear, you've crushed me in a vice, and reduced me to a jelly. Go along with you, do. What a hand you have got. Have you been among the red Indians? Where's your tomahawk?"

"But, Barbara—"

"Don't Barbara me; I'm nothing but gelatine. There go along with you, take the first turning to the right, down by the bracken path; go through the little gate where I found St. Ronans, and when you have walked a dozen paces, you will find a nest." She gave a little ridiculous laugh at that, and nodded meaningly. Geoffrey wanted to shake hands again, but she would not hear of it; only, she condescended to walk with him to the gate itself.

"You have heard the news, I suppose?" she asked, very gravely, as they parted. Yes, Geoffrey had heard the news, and he looked at her very pityingly.

"If I could only help you—if you only knew how

I feel for you all,—tell your father so from me, Barbara."

"I dare not mention your name," said Barbara, quickly. "Dear old Geoff!" I knew how sorry you would be for us. There, good-bye," and Barbara tripped off lightly as ever, but with a graver face than Barbara was ever known to wear before. You see from these few sentences we shall have to retrace our steps by-and-by; just now we must finish our first love-story.

Nest was sitting in the little green hollow Bab called her pulpit. She saw him coming, and gave a great start of joy. Oh how glorious the sky was! what a sunset! what blue-black distances of firs! how beautiful—how beautiful everything was! Her hands worked in each other nervously; her face was dyed with blushes, sparkling with joy. Only to see him—only to hear his voice was life and health to the poor child. He greeted her rather gravely for him, and sat down beside her; his manner was the same as ever, only he did not release her hand.

"What have you been doing to yourself, Nest? How thin—how weak you are." And he looked her over tenderly, like a mother might a sick child that she finds sadly altered after an absence from her. "What have you been doing with yourself, Nest?"

"Nothing!" she answered, and shrank away a little, and then crept closer. "I am so glad you are back—so very glad!" and even in saying those few

words her eyes were wet with shy happiness. Very child as she was, she could not hide it from him. It gave Geoffrey courage for his next speech.

"Do you know why I have come home, Nest? I have come all the way from Scotland to ask you to be my wife. Nay, don't be afraid of me. You knew —you must have known all this time—that I loved you and not Hester. I am free now to marry whom I will, and I will marry no other woman but you."

If he could only have seen her face; but she covered it with her hands, and broke into pitiful sobs. "No, no!" she cried, in a tone of anguish that smote him to the heart. "Leave me now, Sir Geoffrey; please leave me!"

"I will never leave you, Nest, till you have promised to be my wife." Could that earnest, pleading voice be Geoffrey's! She took down her hands at that, and looked at him, with her pale face streaming with tears; its utter misery would have moved a harder man than Geoffrey. "Oh, how good you are," she gasped. "May Heaven bless you; so good and true; and to love me—me, but I will not be your wife!"

"Say rather that you will, sweet Nest."

"Ah, how you tempt me; it is all out of your great pity, Geoffrey—Sir Geoffrey, I mean—you think—" here her poor face grew scarlet—"you think—that I care for you, and am unhappy; but I will not be un-

happy any more. I cannot, when I remember what you have said to me; I shall think of it all my life long, and be grateful to you."

"You owe me no gratitude, dearest child."

"Oh, I do," she answered, simply; "think of your coming all this way to ask me this. Dear friend, dear good friend, I will pray for you, and love you all my life. But I must not be your wife."

"Why not, my darling?"

She broke again into tears at that, and whispered in her agony that God had afflicted her, and made her what she was, a poor deformed girl, as he must know—as he must surely know; and then again she pressed him to let her go.

"Never," was all his answer, and his strong arms held her firmly to him as he kissed the little hands reverently, and then the long shining hair. "You are my own Nest—my very own; my poor little weak child, whom I mean to love and cherish all the days of my life."

And so the cross was taken from Nest, and the crown of a happy love was vouchsafed her.

Would Geoffrey ever repent his choice? Ask him in after years, when he was the blithest and heartiest of country squires, first and last in the hunting-field, and known as the greatest whip in the county, whether he would change his little pale-faced wife then—his childless, ailing wife? She was slightly

deformed, this new Lady Hunsden, people said, but very charming: only, somehow they could never believe in her husband's devotion to her; so preposterous, you know, and all that. Sir Geoffrey knew better, and so did Nest. She knew she was the darling of his heart and the desire of his eyes. "My little Lady," he used to call her, "my little Lady," and hush his voice when he spoke of her. For this rough squire, in his clumsy fondness, treated her as a child, and reverenced her as a saint.

CHAPTER IX.

THE FÊTE AT HUNSDEN PARK.

* * * * We went
* * * * * *
Down through the park ; strange was the sight to me ;
For all the sloping pasture murmured, sown
With happy faces and with holiday.
* * * * * *
* * * * * *

A herd of boys with clamor bawl'd,
And stumped the wicket ; babies rolled about
Like tumbled fruit in grass ; and men and maids
Arranged a country dance, and flew thro' light
And shadow, while the twanging violin
Struck up with 'Soldier-Laddie,' and overhead,
The broad ambrosial aisles of lofty lime
Made noise with bees and breeze from end to end."

Tennyson's Princess.

I HAVE hinted just now that we shall have to retrace our steps a little, a proceeding alike hateful in real life and fiction ; still, we must endure necessary evils, and I think I can promise that I shall not be wearisome; at least, for my humility is great, I hope not.

And this is the position of things at present.

Sir Geoffrey is still in Scotland, and Lady Hunsden

is fretting herself to death over her disappointment. Dr. Heathcote is in tantrums, and Hester glooming terribly! that, you perceive, is a grander and more refined synonym for sulking, but she is doing it in such a way as to make poor Barbara's heart ache.

Yes, Barbara has the heart-ache, a new experience with her, who had never known pain, mental or bodily, all her life long, and whose sufferings had been of a purely imaginative and grandiloquent type; she took to it kindly, however, like a kitten to drowning, with a sort of martyr-like strangled meekness, which made one wish she wouldn't, and all that; she only wondered occasionally in her odd fashion, whether it would ever leave off aching again. Alas! how many a true word is spoken in jest, Barbara, Barbara!

It was not aching to-day, though, of course not; to-day was her birthday, and the school children's fête at Hunsden Park, and be things as they might, she could not help feeling happy, there now; not but what there were a great many obstacles to her thorough enjoyment. Geoffrey was away, so there would not be half so much fun with the children, and Dr. Heathcote had refused to set his foot in Hunsden Park again; and the lady-superintendent, Miss Heathcote, would be missing, and Nest was too ill to go, and now that tiresome Sydney Herbert had come back from the Lakes, and she must mount guard over foolish Connie like some old duenna; all these things were very vexatious,

there was no doubt of that, but still Leigh would be there, and St. Ronans and Mrs. Strath, and Norman, of course,—as though she would care for anything if Norman were not there.

So it came to pass that her mood was of the sunniest as she stood surveying herself on tiptoe, to get a good peep at herself in the drawing-room glass, for you must know that Dr. Heathcote had given her a new dress, and such a dress, too, all white and soft, with wonderful blue veins streaking up and down it deliciously, and dainty little ruffles at throat and wrist; no marvel she was trying, and trying hard, too, to get a peep at herself. It was a pity St. Ronans came in and found her at it though; all women like to look at themselves in the glass, unless they are specially ill-favored, but it is not exactly pleasant to be discovered pirouetting before it on one foot! one turns round so, to catch a glimpse of the back of one's head, or so—pirouette number two.

"Why don't you set to partners, Barbara?" asks Nigel, with an odd twinkle. Barbara glances round at him, colors up, weapons bristling, sees a flat looking parcel in his hand, and yields with honors of war.

"I am two-and-twenty to-day," says Bab, trying to look unconscious, "and Daddie's given me this new dress, isn't it lovely? Connie's obliged to wear her old white one, but then she's one of the teachers, so it doesn't matter, but she looks very nice," she added,

patronisingly. Connie pouts and shrugs her shoulders, she is secretly envious of the new dress, but she looks the picture of girlish prettiness notwithstanding, with her yellow curls, blue eyes, and satin skin; very pretty she is, and she knows it, but Barbara does not look amiss either; there's a bright individuality about her that asserts itself; you can't pass over her quite, that's the fact, though you hardly know whether you admire her or not. That St. Ronans admires her is evident; he stands by quite patiently while she settles her ruffles to her satisfaction, and the grey eyes take in every trick of her countenance. Barbara glances up at him once or twice, rather surprised.

"You look ill, St. Ronans, what is the matter with you?"

He gave an unsteady laugh.

"Pooh, nothing; only my old complaint again, sleeplessness and palpitations. It is always so when I get thinking or excited, it's chronic, I believe."

"Are you sure there is nothing more amiss," she asked, nervously.

"Nothing more than usual, the hot weather tires me, and—and—" he hesitated. "I am afraid there's a little mischief going on in my hip again. I limp rather more than I did. I went up to London yesterday, just to pacify my mother, she wanted me to see one or two of the professional humdrums of fashion, and they all told me the same old tale—winter at Nice,

perfect rest, entire relaxation, and freedom from all excitement." He laughed a low amused laugh, it was rather bitter though; "they forbid me even happy excitement, Barbara; just fancy, when I go to bed every night with dancing pulses, and beating of a dozen hammers, in my brain."

"Oh, St. Ronans!" cried Barbara, truly shocked—somehow she had never seen him look quite so delicate before.

"The biggest of the old humdrums, after he had patted, and poked, and bullied me to his heart's content, was good enough to predict, that by following his prescriptions and keeping myself free from the unwholesome excitements of other mortals, I might enjoy a tolerably long existence—the existence of a cabbage, you understand; and he ended in a most fatherly way—he was an old admirer of the Madre's I believe—by putting his hands on my shoulders, and saying, that humanly speaking, my life was in my own keeping, I could do more for myself than a dozen physicians could.

"He is a wise man," returned Barbara, with the tears in her eyes; "you see," she continued in her shrewd way, "you don't know half the harm you do yourself when you get into one of your excitements: I declare you often terrify me, you look so strange; why can't you be always calm and tranquil as you are now? you have everything to make you happy."

"No, not everything, Barbara; I want one thing more"—he had no time to finish his sentence, for Dr. Heathcote entered the room at this minute, followed by Leigh.

"Where's Connie?"

"Oh, I don't know," replied Barbara, looking helplessly round; "she was here just now—dear me, I'm afraid she has started off for Hunsden by herself, and I particularly desired her to wait for me—how very tiresome of her."

"She bolted through that window while we were talking," said St. Ronans, laughing, "but she can't be farther than the gate, so we can easily overtake her."

"Hester will be very much annoyed," returned Dr. Heathcote, gravely, "she particularly desired you not to lose sight of your sister to-day. We shall have that foolish young Herbert making love to her all the afternoon; it is very careless, very careless of you indeed, Barbara."

"Daddie!"

"Well."

"It's my birthday, Daddie, and it only comes once a year; don't be cross on Bab's birthday."

"Very well, I won't, Barbara; there, run along with you, you goose."

"One moment, Doctor; I have not made my little

offering on Barbara's fête-day—there, *ma petite*, that is from Bab's master."

Barbara's eyes became very round as she opened the case—but at sight of its contents she turned crimson, and snapped it to again in a trice.

"No, thank you, St. Ronans," she said, decidedly; "it is very pretty, much too pretty, and you are very kind—but you must take it back."

"Take it back! nonsense, Barbara."

"Oh, you must indeed. Give it to Nest; it is just fit for her, but it is too costly for me. I can't keep it."

Her words were brusque, almost discourteous—but, to tell you the truth, Bab felt a little frightened.

"Oh, I can't keep it," she repeated, blushing hotly.

Nigel looked a little hurt, but he was not without cunning. He held out the case to the Doctor.

"Look here, Doctor, just settle this foolish point, will you? here, Barbara will not accept my little offering, because she says it is too costly—what nonsense! one would think it was diamonds, instead of a foreign trifle I picked up at Malta."

The Doctor peered through his spectacles, and hemmed and hawed a little. He was evidently of Barbara's opinion. It was a small necklet of gold Maltese work, with a cross attached to it, and was dainty enough for a queen's neck.

"I am afraid it has cost a great deal, Nigel," he said, hesitatingly.

"My dear Doctor, not a bit of it—a mere trifle, only Barbara here makes such a fuss about everything."

"You are sure you did not spend much money on it?"

"Positively nothing; why I should be ashamed to tell you the price." Nigel said this with a mischievous twinkle, that proved he was not speaking exactly the truth.

"Don't believe him, Daddie," said Barbara, stubbornly.

"Oh, as to you," went on Nigel, wheeling suddenly round on her; "I only tell you this: if you won't accept my necklace—yes, and wear it too—I will never give you another painting lesson as long as I live."

He seemed very much in earnest, and Barbara was obliged to submit. She stretched out her hand reluctantly to her father for the case, but Nigel took out the delicate filagree chain, and clasped it round her neck. He looked radiant.

"Does it not go well with her new dress, Doctor? Why don't you have another peep at yourself, Barbara?"

But Barbara was shy, and would not; still it was not in girl's nature not to be pleased with her first ornament. Nigel saw her fingering it proudly afterwards, and felt quite content.

"Thank you, St. Ronans," was all she said; "and now I think we will follow Connie."

Leigh, who had been standing yawning drearily over this little scene, turned round with alacrity at this, and seconded the motion. There was another delay, however—for, just outside the garden door they met Norman, evidently bound for Heathcote House. He came up smiling.

"I was only going to bring you these flowers, Barbara," he said, putting a small bouquet into her hand; "my mother also has sent you a trifle—you see we have not forgotten it is your birthday."

"No, indeed," returned Barbara, delighted; "how good of her and you, too, Norman; why, you have cut all your favorite ferns for me."

"Well, what if I have?" he answered, watching her pleased face—then, as he caught the glitter of her necklace, "why, how smart you are to-day, Barbara! Did the Doctor give you that grand necklace?"

"No, your cousin—I mean St. Ronans," she said, stammering, and feeling rather foolish, she did not know why, but she wished so now that he had not given it—she was afraid Norman might be displeased.

"Oh!" returned Dr. Strath; "well, good-bye, I must speak to the Doctor."

She could not tell what the queer expression on his face meant, or whether he was angry, but the "oh!" damped the rest of the day.

"I think we shall have a storm presently," said St. Ronans, as they skirted the high road.

"I hope so; I like storms of all things," was Barbara's answer. "Thunder and lightning and rain—and plenty of it—only I don't want the school-children to get wet," and then she lapsed into a steady silence.

Hunsden Park was not much of a place, as St. Ronans had truly observed: an uneven space of broken-down fields, more prolific of hillocks and grassed-over ditches than trees; but still the green turf was very pleasant after the dusty roads—and with the white tents, streaming banners, and groups of neatly dressed children and teachers, it presented quite a festive scene—especially when the village band struck up in all its brazen pride, as it marched solemnly under the great triumphal arch, to the tune of "The girl I left behind me." This annual fête at Hunsden was quite a gala-day in the village, not only to the children, but to their parents and relatives also. Not a human being, and hardly a dog in Sunningford that did not put in an appearance that day—unless it were Jabez Stokes, the old cobbler, who used to stand and growl in his doorway, flinging sour words after every blithe lad and lass that had the misfortune to pass his way. No, Jabez and his dog never went; but then Jabez was half cracked—wanting, as his neighbors said,

—and the dog was blind, or next door to it, and so perhaps their loss was not so great, after all.

The Heathcote party were rather late; nearly the whole village was there when they arrived. Lady Hunsden sat in the entrance of one of the tents, in the midst of a group of ladies—every now and then speaking a kindly word or two to some of the hard-working mothers as they passed her. One of the teachers, Henry Rupert, was showing off conjuring tricks in another tent to a little crowd of open-mouthed lads. Another small crowd were herded together, in orderly ranks, before a "Punch and Judy" show; the performance had not yet begun, and the showmen were lolling against a cart; a handsome curly-eared "Toby" barked and capered amongst the children; there was kiss-in-the-ring going on in a green hollow, and just by the gate a knot of eager boys were gathered round a pale-faced consumptive-looking teacher, bent hotly on a paper-chase. Grass, trees, sunshine, bright faces, and summer dresses made up a pretty picture between them. Barbara shook off her moody fit, and entered into the spirit of it in a moment. She picked up a small fat boy who had rolled down into a ditch somehow, and was sitting helplessly at the bottom, feeling forsaken by man, and making up his mind for a roar; a little black dog was looking down at him rather facetiously, with his head well cocked

on one side. Barbara restored him to the level of humanity again—when he trotted off, in company with his canine friend, in pursuit of a great black-faced sheep—that was evidently the attraction of the day to him; the sheep, by the bye, were the only things that did not seem to enjoy themselves—they had got themselves well against the orchard wall, and appeared to object strongly to this fusion of classes. Ruth was sitting under the elm trees, with Miss Vokes—they seemed to have formed an impromptu nursery between them for all the young things of the village—babies in arms and out of arms, toddling wee children, a lame boy, three or four dejected-looking puppies, and a hunch-backed girl.

"We want the poor mothers to have a real holiday," said Ruth, in answer to their amused questioning. Her white dress was creased and she looked hot and tired; but, as Barbara said afterwards, what a dear, beautiful face it was.

"No one knows what a holiday it is to some of them to have nothing to hold," said Miss Vokes, nodding.

She had on a grass-green silk, and her leghorn bonnet was resplendent with primrose ribbons, her little grey curls bobbed over her faded cheeks; she looked like a withered, old spring flower run to seed, and very much out of season; her green gloves had

old cracks and rents in them. Barbara eyed her satirically.

"Miss Vokes, you're an angel," said Leigh, with a laugh and a bow. "Those babies look like white serpents in their long clothes. Do they like lying on their backs?"

Like it! I should think they did. Never was there such a beating of worsted shoes, such splutterings of 'coo—coo.'

Leigh looked a little puzzled. "Are you going to do nursery work all this lovely afternoon," he said in a low voice to Ruth; "they want you in the orchard, I think."

"My place is here," she returned, with lowered eyes. "Drive those sheep away, please; they frighten the babies."

"Oh, there's Connie," cried Barbara, and she hurried off to scold her for her desertion.

Connie was not going to be scolded; she grew saucy, threw up her head and laughed, very shyly, however. Tall, gentle, manly Sydney Herbert hoped that they had not been wanted; he had taken great care of her sister; he would not let her tire herself with the children; they had been sitting ever so long in the shade. Could he fetch Barbara anything?

Barbara gave a great shrug of her shoulders; it was no good, where Connie was, Sydney would be; she wasn't going to have him dangling after her all

the evening, so she washed her hands of them; it was not her fault, and so on. I hope you admire Barbara's method of getting rid of a responsibility.

She joined the party at the Punch and Judy Show, sat in the front boxes, in fact, and enjoyed it very much; then she did a little cricket with two very small boys—one boy bowled endlessly, and said every time "the wicket's down," in a tone of proud delight, when it wasn't; the other batted fiercely, and generally hit nothing. Barbara grew tired of being long-stop to these uninteresting lads, so she proposed ginger-pop, and a change of employment. They drank it in a rakish manner without their jackets, bat in hand, and said, "what innings, Umpire," and then proposed kiss-in-the-ring. Barbara looked at their hot dirty faces, and said no. "I would rather have 'Touch who I can,'" and took to her heels.

They bounded after her at once, with the true war-whoop, but she was bent on losing them. She had some trouble, though, and St. Ronans found her, in consequence, in the last place he expected, among the ladies in the grand tent. She beckoned to him ecstatically.

"Look here, St. Ronans, they are going to have tea in the orchard—not the children, of course, but the gentlefolk and teachers; they will have lots of little tables, as they had last year, and every one will make up their own party."

"Where's the orchard?" said St. Ronans, looking round the Park.

"Why, there. Don't you see where the sheep are, near Ruth's nursery?—but you need not cross all that sunny park to get to it; go round the house, and through the flower garden; it joins the ugly old kitchen-garden Lady Hunsden is so fond of."

"Well, what am I to do there?" he asked, smiling at her bright, eager face.

"Why, secure a table, of course. There's Connie and Leigh, and Sydney Herbert, oh, and Harry Rupert will want to come too; he is another admirer of Connie's, and you—and"—she broke off, as she saw Dr. Strath's square shoulders pushing through the crowd. She was still looking at him, when St. Ronans returned.

"All right. I have got a nice little round table that will hold six."

"Six; oh that won't do at all—it must hold seven. Go back again, St. Ronans, or you will spoil it all."

He looked rather surprised, but he had instituted himself as her squire of the day, so he obediently fulfilled her behests, and just in time, as he informed her, triumphantly, for Katie Rupert wanted it for their party, and he had much ado to settle it.

"Never mind, so that you've done it," said Barbara, contentedly; and then she stood in the entrance to the tent and watched the children ranging themselves

under the trees, while great cans of tea and trays full of piled-up cakes and buns made their appearance, like magic, from the central tent. Grace was said, every child held out its clean mug, and the great business of the day was transacted.

When all the children were satisfied, and not before, deputy teachers were appointed, and the signal was given for adjourning to the orchard. Connie had already disappeared; they found her under the mossy apple trees, presiding at a tea-tray and looking like a Dresden shepherdess. It was a very pretty scene, very; the dozen little tables, each with its snowy drapery, and pyramid of fruit and flowers, set under the low fruit trees; sunset clouds, green grass, bright girlish faces, distant music in the park, the happy voices of children.

"Come, Barbara, what are you waiting for," cried Connie. She had tucked up her white dress, her hair was uncurled with heat and excitement, and her blue eyes were sparkling like sapphires. Sydney Herbert was on one side, Harry Rupert the other, St. Ronans had slipped into the vacant seat by Barbara.

"Come, Barbara," he chimed in a little impatiently, "I left Leigh in the Park; it is no use waiting for him."

Barbara heard neither of them; she still stood up, stretching her neck and peering eagerly among the different tables. "Ah, there he is," she said at last,

with a little sigh of relief, as Dr. Strath appeared, and she beckoned to him smilingly, and pointed to an empty chair. He saw her—she was certain he saw her—for he nodded rather gravely as he scanned their party, and then he passed on; she saw him seat himself at the little table behind them, with Lady Hunsden's plum-coloured brocade on one side, and Miss Vokes' green silk on the other, and Mrs. Rupert's bird of Paradise nodding opposite to him. St. Ronans looked rather triumphant.

"It is no use waiting any longer," he said, softly; and Barbara subsided into her chair with a discomfited face, her birthday fête was spoilt. Leigh came up by-and-by, and brought Ruth with him. The little party was gay enough; people turned round to look at them, and then nodded to each other meaningly. Connie's little love idyll was apparent enough to all eyes.

Barbara alone remained silent and subdued, her fading flowers beside her; she could hear every word Dr. Strath was saying behind her. Now and then she grew fretful over Connie's nonsense. St. Ronans was very quiet, but somehow he irritated her too; it was quite a relief when people pushed their chairs away, and walked up and down chattering and laughing. The band was tuning up again in the Park; there would be dancing by-and-by. Lady Hunsden always set her young people to dance. Connie shook

out her curls coquettishly; she had accepted flowers from both her swains. Sydney looked a little sulky. "You must dance the first quadrille with me," Barbara could hear him say, and then some one trod upon her dress—a heavy foot, Dr. Strath's, she knew it well—she turned round upon him, holding up the rent playfully.

"How very clumsy of me," he said, in a tone of regret, "your pretty new dress, Barbara; I am so sorry."

"Never mind, I can mend it," she returned; then, very persuasively, "you are going to dance with me on my birthday, are you not, Norman?"

"I never dance," he answered, coldly. "Lady Hunsden, shall I take you back to your seat?"

Barbara drew aside with flaming cheeks. St. Ronans had overheard her. She felt hurt, humiliated; he did not seem to notice it, however.

"We shall have a storm presently," he observed, carelessly. "Do you see those lurid clouds, Barbara, they are too red for sunset, and the air is hot to suffocation?"

"That is why I am going to dance," she answered wilfully. "You never dance I know, St. Ronans, so I shall not ask you. Harry Rupert will, though. Come!" she said impatiently to her partner, "don't you hear, they are already through the first figure," and she dragged him off.

She tired one luckless youth after another, but she would not stop; she made the consumptive teacher waltz with her till his mother came and took him forcibly away. She danced till, metaphorically, she had not a foot to stand upon, but all the time she had never felt so dismal in her life; the music jarred on her, the brooding storm fevered her; she laughed her loudest, but her heart was as sore as it could be.

"Ah, why is he so cruel to me, and on my birthday," she was saying, and then she grew angry and rebellious. There was an ominous muttering over their heads, the band was playing "God Save the Queen;" men and boys stood with uncovered heads, a few old men from the almshouses joined in with quavering voices "Confound their politics, frustrate their knavish tricks," and so on; the women tied on the limp hoods over reluctant faces, or darted into the crowd after a missing little one.

"I think, my good friends, you had better go home," called out Dr. Strath's clear voice; "her ladyship has desired me to say that she will be glad if her own personal friends will adjourn to the house with her immediately."

"We must have three times three, doctor," called out one sturdy fellow.

"All right, my lad, only be quick about it then; do you see what a storm is coming on? let the women

and children get under cover, that's all; now for it—hip, hip, hurrah!"

"Hip, hip, hurrah!" cried the crowd excitedly, and then the band filed off, and the old men followed them, and then groups of scurrying women.

"Go up to the house, ladies," continued Dr. Strath, authoritatively, "you will have the storm on you in a minute. Mrs. Rupert, let me help you."

Barbara was standing near him, but he did not see her; she thought he did, poor child, and raged terribly.

"He does not care what becomes of me; there, I thought so, he has got hold of Katie Rupert; where's St. Ronans, I wonder? but it does not matter, I'm not going up to the house," and she hurried after the lessening crowd that were pressing out of the Park gates. Some one touched her; it was Ruth.

"Miss Heathcote, what are you doing here? I can't find Naomi and Paul anywhere; they have the children with them too. Dear, dear, what a terrible storm is coming up," and she looked at the sky and shuddered.

"Are you going on to the mill, Ruth?"

"Yes, I must, or they will be wondering what has become of me. I shall never get there in time," she continued, in a frightened tone; "I am a sad coward in a storm too."

"I like it of all things," returned Barbara, cheerfully; "don't be afraid, Ruth, I will go with you."

She was quite reckless—a little adventurous; it rather pleased her to think that while they had forgotten her in their snug comfort inside, she would be battling with the storm; how sorry, how frightened they would be when they heard of it afterwards. She never thought about her new dress, or the danger to which she was so madly exposing herself; it did not matter what would become of her, she thought, since Norman had forgotten his little friend.

They plodded on wearily—both were tired, both jaded—with all the haste that they could possibly make, they had hardly accomplished half the distance before the storm was upon them in its fury.

That storm was long remembered in Sunningford. The great oak in Hunsden Park, under which the children had feasted a few hours ago, was scathed and riven in two, and three of the villagers' hayricks were fired. In a minute the sky was lurid and illuminated with electric light, the forked lightning darted among the ragged clouds with fearful velocity, while peal after peal of thunder seemed to surcharge the ear, the whole artillery of heaven seemed marching up in one mighty phalanx of sound. Awful beyond all storms was this one, to which Barbara had so thoughtlessly exposed herself. If it alarmed her, it deprived Ruth almost of reason; she seemed beside herself

with terror, her face grew ghastly pale, and at every fresh peal, she put her hands to her head with a startled scream.

"Oh Barbara! oh Miss Heathcote! what shall we do?" she sobbed; "I shall die out here. There, it has struck that tree just by—did you see it? Oh God, have mercy upon us! I dare not die just yet."

"Who says we shall die?" cried Barbara; "we shall, if you stand there just under that hedge. Oh, but it is truly awful!" she continued, with a little tremor of fear on her own account; "do, come on, Ruth, do try and be brave, or you will be the death of us both."

There had been no rain as yet; now there was a hissing drop or two, and then a great splutter; presently there was a sweeping deluge on them, a dark curtain of blackness seemed to draw over the whole sky, and its flood-gates opened upon them. There was a little wood-cutter's hut at the bend of the road, that Barbara remembered to have passed yesterday; in a quick, breathless whisper she bade Ruth follow her, and in a few moments they were standing in the crazy doorway, which just afforded them sufficient refuge from the down-pour, the door itself was locked.

"We shall be quite dry here," said Barbara, with a miserable attempt at cheerfulness, but Ruth only crouched down in her corner, and covered her face with her hands.

"Why, Ruth, this is past all reason," she remonstrated. She was trembling all over with fear and excitement herself, but it struck her that such excessive terror was childish.

"Oh, there it is again!" cried Ruth Canham, with a great scream, and both were half blinded by the sudden flash. "Oh, Miss Heathcote, is this to be my punishment? I have done no such great wrong, have I? God knows how I was tempted. I cannot die, I am not fit to die just yet."

She seemed quite delirious; poor Barbara shook in every limb.

"Oh, do be quiet, Ruth; if we have got to die we must, I suppose, but I don't mean to if I can help it. There's some one coming along the road," she added a minute later, "a man—I can see him all this distance off; he seems hardly able to make way against the storm; is it Norman?" in a tone of intense joy, "it is—why I do believe it is Leigh."

Ruth murmured something inaudible, she seemed hardly able to keep herself upright. Leigh, for it was he, strove manfully against the wind and rain, but the lightning blinded him, so that he could not see them.

"Where are you, girls?" he shouted.

"Here, here," cried Ruth, darting out of the doorway. "Oh Leigh, my darling Leigh! you will be killed!" and she clung to him, sobbing hysterically.

"Killed, nonsense!" he said impatiently, and trying to free himself; but Ruth was past listening to reason, she had thrown her arms round him, and buried her face on his shoulder like a child; there was nothing for it but to hold her up and speak gently to her; it must all come out now. He tried hard to see Barbara's face, but he could not.

"There, you foolish child, are you better? What makes you such a coward, Ruth, I thought better things of you. The storm is nearly over now, let me wrap you in this cloak I have brought; there," and he folded it round her, and looked tenderly in her tearful face. "Now, Barbara;" but Barbara took it from him without a word; it was too long for her, and she had to hold it up like a train; that was funny; she was counting the big rain drops, too—one—two—three—how they splashed.

"That's the fortieth," said Bab; she wasn't thinking about anything, she was really quite stunned—at least wet, and cold, and shivering, what an awful shiver: that was the forty-fifth drop; let her only get out of that doorway, she was choking.

"The rain is not over quite," said Leigh, turning his flushed face—oh so flushed—to Barbara.

Barbara gave a queer laugh.

"It is a storm," she said, "a cruel storm too; but I mustn't stand here, counting the rain drops any longer, it is harassing, let us go on to the mill."

She was not quite sure whether she was awake or dreaming, or what that sick frightened pain meant at the bottom of her heart.

"Oh do come, Leigh," she cried. She had not once looked at him, or at Ruth either; she went splashing on through the puddles, trailing cloak and all; her eyes met the still flickering lightning fearlessly, the thunder might have been rapt music for her. "There's another shiver," she said, "two more puddles; I think my feet are rather wet; what an odd night—wonderful; 'Confound their politics, Frustrate their knavish tricks;' never mind, I dare say I shall wake up presently and find it all a dream."

CHAPTER X.

"UNTO SEVENTY TIMES SEVEN."

"Think gently of the erring;
Ye know not of the power
With which the dark temptation came,
In some unguarded hour.
Ye may not know how earnestly
They struggled, or how well,
Until the hour of weakness came,
And sadly thus they fell.

"Think gently of the erring,
Oh! do not thou forget,
However darkly stain'd by sin,
He is thy brother yet;
Heir of the self-same heritage,
Child of the self-same God,
He has but stumbled in the path,
Thou hast in weakness trod."

Christian Lyrics.

I do not think that we need envy Barbara splashing through the great puddles in her long cloak, and I am sure even less so as she stood in the cheerful mill kitchen before a blazing wood fire, pushing her hair off her face with restless fingers—always a habit of Barbara's when she was perplexed or in trouble, and which gave her the appearance of being all fore-

head and truly forlorn, she might be monarch of all she surveyed; but a more desolate, bedraggled little monarch could not be imagined. An old deaf woman came from somewhere in the back premises, very soapy as to arms, and with an immovable eye, who dried the backs of her hands on her apron and volunteered help. Naomi and Paul had not returned. Barbara thanked her and took off one boot, and remained vaguely contemplating the other. On being reminded of her oversight in a cracked treble, she thanked her again. She drew off from one side of the fire as the others came in. She seemed only intent on warming her feet; but in reality she saw everything that went on. She saw Leigh had regained his usual color, but not his usual manner; that there was something defiant in the way he waited upon Ruth, and ministered to her special comfort. It was as though he were determined to assert a conscious claim on her. Ruth accepted his attentions reluctantly: his peremptory fondness seemed to terrify her. Every now and then she cast frightened glances at Barbara to see how she was taking it; but Barbara only went on warming her feet. By-and-by Leigh left them to fetch them some warm tea, as he said, to prevent them taking cold; in reality, because the silence alarmed him. He wanted Barbara to speak first; but Barbara had got a lump in her throat like a sudden quinsy, and could not. She

was full of sick pain too, and the thunder seemed to have got into her head.

As soon as Leigh disappeared, Ruth came up to her and timidly put her hand on her wet dress. Barbara shook it out of her hold in a moment and drew steadily away. The movement seemed to startle Ruth, she turned paler than ever.

"Why do you look at me like that, Miss Heathcote?"

"What was that you called him?" panted Bab. "What is he to you, you whom I have called my friend?" She looked like a lioness that had lost its young and is ready for the spring. Her eyes were quite fierce and sparkling; but by a strong effort at will she controlled herself. "What is he to you, Ruth Canham?"

A light tread came behind Ruth as she was about to answer, and a strong arm was thrown round her as Leigh drew her proudly to him. "Be silent, love; you have me to defend you. Barbara, my dear sister, that is not her name."

Barbara was standing. She sat down now with a little shiver; but she kept herself quiet.

"This is Ruth Heathcote, Babchen darling; Ruth Heathcote, my wife."

The thunder must be in her head, Bab thought, or the dull surging of the sea. She was so stunned and cold, and yet her face was flaming scarlet. Her

scared look terrified Leigh, for he put Ruth quietly aside and came towards her.

"Oh Bab! do speak to us—only one word, Barbara."

"I am listening to you, Gyp." She was, only all her bearing seemed to be concentrated in her strained brilliant eyes. She verily believed there was real tangible pain at her heart. By-and-bye she got used to it. He knelt down beside her and brought his face on a level with hers. The bold, daredevil expression that it had taken at the first moment of discovery gave place to his old look—a little subdued, a little troubled, that was all. "I am listening to you, Gyp," she repeated, in a dreary tone; but even at that moment when her whole upright nature quailed under the shock, her fingers touched his bright hair lovingly—handsome, wild Gypsy Leigh!

"I want you to hear me," he replied, in his old winning way. "I want you not to be angry with me, you of all people, Dame Muffet!"

The hand closed on his curls almost convulsively.

"Oh Leigh! my own brother!—my own only brother!"

It was the first cry of her pent-up, loving and deceived heart. It awed him into penitence in a moment.

"Don't take on like that, Barbara. I am always

Gyp, you know. You don't think I shall change to you now I'm married?"

She gave a great start. "Married, Leigh! married, and not to tell me—not to tell Barbara. Cruel! cruel!" Oh the passionate pain in her voice; but she kept it under somehow, though some spring of Bab's heart was broken then and for ever. He moved restlessly to his feet and paced up and down. How was he to answer her?

"You would not have helped me, Barbara," he said, deprecatingly. "It was the only thing I could not have told you."

"No, I would not have helped you," she replied; "you are right there; but I would rather you had died than you had done this thing, Leigh Heathcote." That made him angry. Weak, impulsive natures like his are always soon prone to wrath.

"It is no unpardonable sin. How you talk, Barbara. I have acted foolishly, perhaps; nay, madly; but when a man is in love, how can he answer for himself?"

"How old are you, Leigh?"

"One-and-twenty," he returned, with an abrupt laugh. "Have you forgotten my age, Barbara?"

"I forget everything, I believe," she answered, in the same dreary voice, as though she were repeating a monotonous lesson. Her fire had died out, the sense of his deceit seemed to crush her. "Dishonorable,

unfair, untrue," she murmured—"untrue to us all, Leigh; but there, you are only a boy—only a mad, unhappy boy." That nettled him again.

"I suppose I must bear what you have to say, since I have placed myself in this position. Don't try me too far, though. Come here, Ruth." And as she advanced obediently towards him he drew her to him with an exulting fondness. "Look at this face, Barbara, and if you have any honesty you would confess that it ought to win me forgiveness." Poor woe-begone face that it was, it looked fairer than ever.

"Oh Leigh! if you would let me speak," she whispered.

"No, it is my turn now. Bide patiently, love. You are my wife, that is enough for you. Never fear, we shall win them over yet. Barbara, if you would only speak, do you think my father will forgive us?"

"I think you will break his heart, Leigh: as God knows, you have mine!" she muttered to herself. He resumed his restless stridings to and fro.

"We knew there was no hope, she and I," he continued. "It was all my fault. You must not blame her—none of you, Barbara. I told her that our Heathcote pride would never allow me to marry a yeoman's daughter, though she might be as beautiful as a princess; and I never left her, I never gave her any peace till she promised to marry me." Bar-

bara leant forward to catch his words, but she did not answer.

"I knew it was wrong, of course; but I was sorely tempted. I suppose I was mad for the time being, I don't know. I said to her, 'Marry me now, and my father will be sure to forgive me—his only son. I have no fear of him, none; when you are once my wife, and the thing done and past praying for, everything will come right. There'll be a row of course; but that I'm prepared for, and you must take your chance.' I only bargained for a few weeks' concealment. My plans were not quite ripe; but Ruth's foolish terror has precipitated everything."

"I could not help it," she pleaded. "Oh Leigh! I thought God's judgment had overtaken me for my sin, my deceit."

"Tut—nonsense!" he returned, hurriedly; and then he went very close to Barbara, leaning over her as she sat with averted eyes.

"Barbara."

"I have heard it all, Leigh."

"Yes, I know; but I want you to stand my friend. You are never going to forsake me in my trouble." He had been bold enough hitherto; but now the real cowardice and weakness of the man showed itself.

"I will never forsake you," she answered, calmly.

"Thank you, Barbara; but——"

"Hear me out," she continued. "I want you to

understand me for once. You have hurt me terribly, Leigh. You have shocked me somehow; but you are Gyp for all that—my dear old playfellow Gyp. No, Bab will never forsake her brother." And she stretched out her two hands and brought his face down to hers. He kissed her with moistened eyes.

"God bless you, Barbara! but you must forgive Ruth too."

Then Barbara got up. "It is all right between you and me," she answered, hurriedly. "I have nothing to say to your wife—nothing."

"Oh Barbara!"

"I can't help it, Leigh. She was my friend, and she deceived me. Ah! but I forgot"—very piteously—"you deceived me too."

"Yes, it was all my fault. Don't blame her, Babchen."

"Oh, but I must!" she answered, and she confronted her rival again. "She was older than you; she knew better, Leigh. It is not reasonable, perhaps—it is not right; but I cannot tell a lie. I do not forgive her."

"My trouble is greater than I can bear," cried Ruth, turning her white face to her husband; but her sad appealing looks did not help her.

"Why are you so hard on her?" remonstrated Leigh. "It is always so with women—always. I tell you I am to blame, not she."

"No—no; she is right," murmured Ruth, brokenly. "I knew better; I was not blinded. All the world will judge me harshly; but I could not give you up, I could not," and she broke into bitter weeping.

Barbara looked at her in stony silence. Her whole soul yearned over the brother who had deceived her and broken her heart; but for the woman, the partner of his deceit, she had no pity. So does the devil take part in our sorrows and turn them to his own account. This spice of gall checked the flow of Barbara's generosity; it had brimmed over, now it stopped. But constant to the integrity of her nature, the nature that loathed all deceit, she had spoken the truth. She was near giving way though when she looked at Leigh. He was half beside himself at the sight of Ruth's grief.

"How can you be so hard on her?" he repeated, fiercely.

"Hush! Leigh, come here. I am not speaking against her, am I? Only I cannot forgive her all at once."

"But will you? Will you, presently?"

"I don't know. How can I? I must think it over a little. Don't be angry with me, Leigh, I am so miserable. Only tell me, dear, what I am to do for you; for it is growing late—so late—and we must go home."

"You must, you mean."

"What!" she exclaimed, in alarm. "You are never going to let me return alone?"

"I must. Don't think me a coward, Barbara; but I can't face it to-night, that's the truth. Hillyard will be home presently. I shall take him into confidence. I daresay he will find me a sacking and some chaff at the mill. I don't mind what her folk think of it," he continued, with a little disdain; "but I can't go in and tell my father and Hester, not to-night, Barbara."

"When will you?" she asked, quietly.

"Oh, I'll write to-morrow; no, that will not do, don't you think—can't you help me, Barbara?" He hesitated and looked at her meaningly.

"Help you? Oh, I understand now what you mean by being your friend. I had rather you had asked me anything but that—but I will not go back from my word."

"There's a darling Babchen."

"You want me to go home and tell Daddie. I think I would rather lie down and die on the road, but I'll do it, Leigh."

"My dear brave little sister."

"No, I am not that; I am nothing but a miserable Barbara—am I to do anything else, Leigh?"

"No, only come and tell me, to-morrow, how he takes it. I shall be here waiting, you know; if he be

not very angry, and I may go and plead my own cause, or he will come and see Ruth—all will be well. I am afraid I am acting cowardly, Barbara, but it has all come upon me so suddenly to-night, that I am not prepared for it; if I had only had time given me I should have been stronger."

"Should you, Gyp; well, good-night." She kissed him and clung to him for a moment, and then went out into the wet cold starlight; she never looked at Ruth; presently she was splashing through the great puddles again.

Was it all a dream, a black ugly dream? no, Bab knew it was a reality; the chill night wind blew round her, there was only a faint uncertain light by which to pick her way, but she stepped on resolutely; she was girding up herself to do this thing that he had bidden her: though she would rather lie down on the wet miry road and die, as she told him. What a task was committed to her, the task of all others from which her whole nature shrank. From childhood Barbara had adored her father, she had ever turned to him the sunniest side of her character—not but what the sunshine showed prickles enough sometimes. Still she had ever borne herself towards him with a wholesome sweetness, tempering her rugged moods out of reverence to him, and comporting herself at all times with a filial honesty that had a strange mingling of the child and the woman in it. And now she was

to go home and tell him this thing: that the son and brother of the house, his idolised boy, had deceived them all; that he had gone out of his father's house almost penniless, to entangle himself by marrying a yet more penniless girl; one whom the world, whom they themselves, must regard as beneath them, a village schoolmistress—but that was not all; how would the knowledge of this long deceit, this clandestine marriage, wound his father's heart. "I am his only son, he is sure to forgive me," Leigh had said. He might forgive him; such a nature as the doctor's could not long retain even a just anger, but how would it sap at the foundations of that loving trust in his boy; would it not, might it not, in that saddest of all Scriptural expressions, "bring down his grey hairs with sorrow to the grave?" For to some natures, natures of spotless integrity, there is no sorrow like that of being deceived by one we love—to love, and yet to be ashamed of the object of our love, ah! that is terrible; to go on trusting and happy, and suddenly to be made astonished by some display of guilty weakness, to find out that our idol is not quite what we thought it—not quite so true or so honest, or so strong, morally strong, as we imagine, ah! that is saddest of all; if they had done anything but deceived us, we could have borne it better. Yet one who knew human nature taught us to pray that as we forgive others we might be forgiven. Barbara knew her father well,

and therefore she trembled; but not the less did she gird herself up for the thing she had to do. I have been slow as yet to establish Barbara's reputation as a heroine, and have taken her oddly concocted narratives of her own doings, or her own thoughts, with a private reservation of my own; to me it seems there was nothing specially heroic in the way she assisted St. Ronans, or picked up Winnie; she made herself useful of course, as women will in such emergencies—at least not quite helpless. To be sure Winnie would have trotted fast enough out of danger without her, I am quite certain of that; neither would St. Ronans have bled to death, he would have shouted for assistance, or strapped up his own hand; and I never could see the actual juxtaposition of Geoffry's horse cantering quietly down the road with poor Nest, tucked neatly in her dock nettle bed. I have taken all these several episodes with a reservation, as I have said, but it does strike me that in her recent interview with her brother there was something great in Barbara, something almost heroic, as such phrases go, in the task she had set herself.

She had gone with the way of the world, and condemned the woman; that was one flaw in her greatness, I grant of course; but still with what sweetness she had answered him, how the strength and faithfulness of her nature developed under the shock of her great sorrow; he had done wrong, but she would

never forsake him, she would be his true, his truest friend. I confess I do admire Barbara here, my heart bleeds for her as she goes splashing down the miry lanes under the dim starlight.

They were all in the supper-room when she entered—all but one, him she had left behind her; of course she got a chiding for her tardiness, she expected that.

"You are very late, Barbara," said Hester, in some displeasure; "where have you been?"

Connie whispered as she passed her, "Sydney has been here to supper, and has just gone." Barbara slipped into a chair by her father.

"Why were you not with the rest?" continued Connie; "no one knew anything about you; where did you take refuge in the storm, Bab? Nigel Strath and Norman were in a fine way I can tell you."

Barbara tried to smile, but she could not. "I was in the woodcutter's hut first, and afterwards at Dort's Mill."

"At Dort's Mill, were you?" said her father, in some surprise; "no wonder we could not find you. What makes you so pale, my little Barbara? There, take your supper, and we will hear about everything afterwards." But Barbara could not eat, the slight morsel she took seemed to choke her, she drank some water feverishly and pushed her plate away. Dr. Heathcote looked at her rather uneasily. "Are you ill that you cannot eat, Barbara?"

"Yes—no; there is nothing the matter with me, Daddie."

"Where is Leigh?" asked Hester, abruptly. Her quick observation told her something was the matter; the hot color rushed over Barbara's face in a moment.

"I left him at Dort's Mill, he came after me there," she stammered; "don't look at me so, Hester, I am doing the best I can; why are you all looking at me?"

"You have something to tell us, Barbara," said her father, struck by the pain in the girl's face.

"Yes; I have something to say," she repeated, "something that Leigh has bade me tell you." She stopped again—how was she to do it without being too sudden? she had rehearsed it all coming, but now she was failing miserably—"oh, how am I to tell you?" she cried, and then she broke down, and put her arms round her father's neck and burst into a flood of tears.

"What does she mean?" asked the doctor, turning very pale, but he tried to soothe her notwithstanding.

"Barbara, my dear child, if you have any bad news for us, do not keep us in suspense,"—his voice shook terribly,—"what have you to tell me about Leigh?"

"He is not hurt or killed," replied Barbara, speaking as well as she could for her sobs, "don't think it, father. He is well, quite well—only he is married." That was how she blurted it out. The doctor started as though he had been shot.

"What!" he shouted.

"Oh, Daddie, it is true; quite—quite true; but think what a boy he is, so mad, so impulsive, you must forgive him."

"Barbara, will you tell me what you mean?"

"It is as I have said; he is married, Daddie, has been married a whole month, to Ruth Canham, our village schoolmistress, the sister of Paul Hillyard, the miller." She had not done it well, but she had got it all out now. She drew a great sobbing breath of relief.

"Impossible!" groaned the doctor. Hester's face grew dark. Connie began to cry.

But the unhappy father would not believe it. Barbara had to go all over it again. "My son acted clandestinely, my boy deceived his father," he said at last, when everything was made plain to his understanding.

His daughters hid their faces from the sight of that reverent grief, that pious anger; once before it had fallen on their devoted heads when he thought his son was disgraced; now he had not a word against them, but his sorrow was cruel. "I am deceived," he said once and again; "my only boy has deceived me. I have been a hard father to you all, then. I hope God will forgive the old man." And then when Barbara pleaded the goodness and beauty of Ruth—"Why could he not have come to me and told me this thing; am I a tyrant that I should forbid him the girl—what

does he mean to do now; are he and his wife to live on me—am I to keep them in their poverty?"

"They deserve to starve," said Hester, harshly; "that woman, too, I've no patience with her, she has disgraced our family."

"Hush, Essie," returned Barbara, softly; and then they all sat round him in stricken silence—if only he had stormed—but the sight of all this sorrow was intolerable to them.

The servants came in for prayers, Hester motioned them away. Dr. Heathcote rebuked her; "Have we no need to pray to-night?" he said, and he made them range themselves in their usual order. They placed the big Bible before him, and he began to read to them, but his voice was a little broken; he selected the chapter of the prodigal son, or rather it seemed to open there of its own accord. Tears fell from Barbara's eyes. "I will arise and go to my father;" oh! most touching, most pathetic of all stories. But it was too much for his strength, Hester had to finish it; he sat back in his chair through that and the closing prayer. "Unhappy boy," Barbara could hear him say, and then came the amen, and they all rose; but he still sat back, shading his face from the light, and very quiet. They waited a little while, and then he said good-night to them all three, very gently. Barbara was last, and he gave her a blessing. "My good true little daughter," he said. Bab thought she

saw him totter as he got near the door, and ran towards him, but he put her back kindly, and went out. Hester followed him after a minute, and the others were left alone.

"Sydney will never believe it," said Connie, indignantly, "why, he has only seventy pounds a-year, has he, Barbara?"

"Oh, do be quiet, Con," returned Barbara; she wanted Hester to come back that she might speak to her; she sat listening with irritable nerves to every jarring door or creak on the stairs.

Hester came back after a time, but looking pale and frightened. "I have sent off for Norman, Barbara; father is ill." Bab darted out of the room without a word.

I mean to pass over this; here I dare not linger, such scenes as these I will not handle; it was a very slight stroke, very, but that it was one alarmed them all—we can feel for them.

Norman came presently, and relieved much of their anxiety. Afterwards, when he spoke to them alone, he said that he had noticed for some days that Dr. Heathcote had been ailing; there had been something on his mind, he was sure; he thought monetary matters. He was positive something more than ordinary was amiss; perfect rest and quiet, and he might yet do well; it was a mere touch, and so on.

They had to tell him all. He was greatly shocked,

of course, but very temperate in his expressions about Leigh. Unlike most men of a high moral tone, he was very lenient to the failings of other and weaker mortals; perhaps he refrained from saying all he thought out of pity for Barbara; his eyes rested upon her so softly as he spoke. Barbara kept out of the conversation as much as she could. She could hardly breathe, lest she should be forbidden access to her father's room, but she had no cause for fear. Hester said something about going back to the invalid. "Do so by all means," he returned, "and you must try and have a good night, Barbara, that you may relieve your sister to-morrow." Oh, the grateful look Bab gave him.

She had a very restless day of it; she kept in the sick-room most of the time, trying hard to be useful, but provoking Hester sadly by her left-handed ways; she had rather a habit of putting things down in the wrong places and spiriting them away when they were most wanted; but she did her poor little best, however, and that is what I wish we could all say. Towards evening she was relieved from her post, and started off to Leigh immediately; her errand was even a sadder one than yesterday, but she was getting used to trouble already.

He was sitting on the low wall of the mill garden, waiting for her. He came up, his felt hat rather on one side, and trying to look as usual. Bab put up

her face to be kissed, very quietly; his first speech was rather reproachful.

"I have been waiting for you all day, Barbara."

"I know you have. I could not help it, Leigh—indeed I could not. Can we sit down somewhere?" she looked tired and jaded enough, poor little soul; one day in the sick-room had tired her more than a month would some people; that and the trouble and perplexity, too. Leigh pointed to the arbor in the mill-garden. "No, not there," Bab answered, hurriedly. "Why shouldn't we sit under that haystack, yonder?" He complied rather sulkily.

"I hope you are not going to keep up your bad feelings to Ruth," he said, in rather an injured tone. She let that pass.

"I couldn't come before, Leigh," she began, quickly. "I was sorry enough for your suspense, but far more sorry for the cause. Gyp, dear, Daddie is ill."

"No!" he cried, starting to his feet. "Don't say I've done it. Don't tell me that, Barbara."

She put up her hand to her head, wearily. "If you will only sit down and listen to me; try to hear it quietly; he's better now."

She had much ado to tell him all, but she got through it at last, and then she found he was not to be comforted. He sat with his face hidden in his hands, so overwhelmed with self-reproach, so heart-

stricken and remorseful, that he made her truly wretched.

"If he dies without forgiving me," cried the poor boy—he was little more than a boy—"I shall be miserable all my life long. Why do you keep me from him? I will see him; I tell you I will see him, Barbara."

"Do you want to kill him?" she replied, earnestly. "Dear Leigh, has there not been enough wrong-doing without this?" She drew down his hot limp hand and stroked it softly: as she looked at him sitting there on the heap of straw, with the setting sun streaming redly on his dark, beautiful face, she was reminded of a picture she had seen of the Prodigal Son, and so recalled to the reading of last night, that she could hardly restrain her tears.

"If you will only be patient," she pleaded. "Think how hard it is for us, for all of us, and we have done nothing to deserve it." She did not mean to say that; but such truisms would make themselves heard. She went on stroking his hand. "All excitement is forbidden; it would be mad—fatal, for you to see him now; in a few days, perhaps—and then only if he asks for you, Norman says."

"He is not likely to do that," returned Leigh, bitterly. "Why do you touch me—why do you speak to me, Barbara? I am as good as my father's murderer—am I not?" and then he turned over on

his face on the straw, and would hear nothing that she had to say; this illness of his father, the father who had doated on him, and indulged him from childhood, did more to bring the full consciousness of his unmanly deceit home to him, than any word could have done. Now, indeed, he saw it in its true light; the madness, the foolishness, the utter misery of it all. He could not comfort himself and say now as he had said to Barbara, it was no unpardonable sin, only the light folly of youth, and so on; he could not gloss it over now; had he not stabbed the tenderest trusting heart that he could ever know; the faithfullest, the dearest? He had now but one wish, the wish of all true penitents, the yearning for a father's forgiveness. He had sinned in the fiery passion of youth, and now he was full of the sickness of desolation; the wild young heart was a very loving one, and well for his future that it was so. If repentance could ever be commensurate with sin, he was paying its full penalty in those bitter moments during which he lay with his face downwards on the straw, deaf to everything but his remorse.

Barbara ceased talking to him, and sat wearily looking on the sunset sky. How happy she had been yesterday, and then came the storm, and that terrible hour in the mill-kitchen. Barbara wondered what Naomi and Paul thought about it all; but she was too tired even to follow out this conjecture; her heart

bled for Leigh, but yet she was glad that it was so; it took all her hard feelings away somehow, and made her even think tenderly of Ruth. She gathered a few straws idly, and played with them; by-and-by she said quietly, "It is getting late, and I must go back." He sat up at that.

"Dear Leigh, I wish I could leave you more happily, but I cannot. Try and be brave till I come again to-morrow. Your wife should make you brave, dear."

His face took a less sad expression, and then it brightened all over; there was a click of the mill-gate hard by, and Ruth came out into the lane. She was looking for him, they saw. She had on a print hood, such as the women wore about there, and there was a little flush on her face; it looked eager, a little impatient; the hand moved restlessly with the gold guard on it; so had she waited for him evening after evening, in her quiet beauty; was it any wonder that the poor boy was so infatuated? Barbara's heart grew a little hard again. Leigh seemed as though he wanted to go to her.

"There she is, Barbara; you will speak to her to-night, will you not?"

"No, not to-night. See how late it is, and I must be gone."

"And you will come again to-morrow," he repeated, still watching his wife. She did not see them, she

was turning into the mill-gate, evidently disappointed, and all his momentary animation vanished.

"Yes, I will come again. Good-night, Leigh, darling." She thought he was going to leave her, but he walked with her to the end of the lane, and took a moody farewell of her. She was tired enough, poor child, but she crept into the mill as he turned and watched him out of sight. She saw Ruth come out again, and advance joyfully to meet him. She saw them move down the lane slowly, hand in hand, like lovers; and then she drew back still further into the dark, silent mill. If they could only have seen her stretching out her hands after them, with the great tears rolling down her face; poor Bab, she sobbed all the way home, and long after she got into her den.

"Gyp has a new partner," she said once with a bitter laugh; and then, "Oh, Gypsy Leigh, my darling—my darling!" and cried herself to sleep.

CHAPTER XI.

THE PRODIGAL SON.

"Yea, little maid, for am not If orgiven?"
Tennyson's Guinevere.

And so trouble had come to Barbara, as it must come to all of us, at some time in our lives.

Broken idols!

Ah, when shall we learn our lessons, we women especially? Those arms of clay, flesh and blood sympathies—those poor frail humanities to which we will cling, will trust our all; those sandy fabrics which we build for ourselves; and so building, perish heart-crushed among our own ruins—when shall we ever test their real value, or estimate them at their true cost?

There is none good save One. Why are we then so astonished, so downcast, so confused, when our idol, whom we worshipped with such vain worshippings, such empty oblations, suddenly developed weakness, showed itself human, prone to error, a mere broken reed, shaken by the wind of circum-

stance? Oh fools, blind beyond all blindness, there is none good save One:

True, most true; and yet, perhaps, there is no sorrow like disappointed love. I have said it once before. I say it now. No sorrow like a deceived or broken trust in one in whom we have reposed confidence.

So it was with Barbara; so it is with all of us.

It broke her down though.

It was the first time that her undisciplined nature was brought face to face with a real tangible trouble; and, take it all in all, she was not bearing it so much amiss. She had winced a little at its suddenness, but there had been no special outcry or lamentation on her part; already she was beginning to understand the hard, sad, unpalatable truth, that suffering is our destiny—and she took such portion as fell to her share with the silence that belonged to graver years.

I want you to understand this phase of Bab's nature; the under-lying current, which was so strong and firm; others who lived with her, and knew her better than you and I (?), failed to comprehend her; they could not believe that the childishness that had set such store by trifles, whose humors were as variable as an April day, and changed from grave to gay, and from sunshine to storm in a moment, should bear this trouble which had befallen them with a

quietness which belonged more to the stoic—just her old self—a little taciturn, a trifle dull, a little jaded-looking, perhaps, and that was all.

She was so reserved they said. Yes; Bab was very shy with them all, she shrank even from her best friend, Norman; if she could, if she had strength enough, she would hide her pain from every one, even from herself; she could not bear the gentlest probing of her wound, her heart bled inwardly; she suffered with a weary conscientious suffering, which knows its pain is for all time; ten years hence, twenty years, she would care to face it as little as she did now; the memory of it all would be just as bitter—that she had been so deceived.

Her idol was of clay, and she knew it. The arm upon which she had leaned all too fondly had given way, had deserted her; she must write against that dearly loved name as it was written of Reuben of old—"Unstable as water, thou shalt not excel." Alas! was there no reason for her soreness? with all his faults, all his short comings—and that they were many Barbara knew—she could not have believed him capable of this rash act, this prolonged deceit.

"I would rather you had died than you had done this thing, Leigh Heathcote," she had said to him, and she had meant it too; and yet she had forgiven him; her voice had been full of tenderness when she answered him, the sweetness of her

words still haunted him—"Bab will never forsake her brother."

And, with all the strange contradiction of a woman, her love was even greater for him now that he had so sinned and been so forgiven, than it had ever been; if he had been the desire of her eyes hitherto, he was now the one thought of her heart, save and except that sweet love for her father; she was growing grave with devising projects for his future life and happiness.

"If I could lay down my life for you, dear, I would," she said to herself, over and over again; "if only the opportunity would come for showing you what is in my heart; you should see, then, if any self-denial, any sacrifice, of my whole, whole life, even be too great for Bab."

And, then, as regards that one flaw in her greatness, her persistent avoidance of Ruth. Was it not in accordance with her character? The strongest ingredient in Bab's nature was her jealousy; it leavened everything with its unlawful leaven. Was it not natural then that she should harden her heart, at least for a little while, against the woman who had robbed her of her brother's heart, who was the cause of his temptation, the partner, the willing partner of his deceit? you see Barbara's gold was still drossy, and mixed with baser metals. It may be that I am incredulous of these sudden conversions;

trouble does not change our natures, that is the work of a higher power; it only developes, more strongly, the marked features of our inner man, bringing strange things to light it may be, some few under-currents, overlooked as Barbara's were, which in time were to flood all.

She was indefatigable in her attendance on her father. Hester began to respect her persevering efforts and ceased all satirical comments on Bab's ways; she was a little quaint in her nursing, perhaps, and rather original in her manner of doing things; but there was something pleasant in her left-handedness too, it gave you novel surprises and was in all contradistinction to other and pre-conceived ideas. If you expected a thing to be done in a certain way Bab would be sure to convince you before long that you were quite wrong; she contrived the most singular upsets of Hester's little plans in the happiest way imaginable.

"I have given Daddie his arrowroot; it wasn't the time for it at all; but you see—", and so on, and so on; but somehow it always came right in the end, only it kept you on the *qui vive* to know what Bab's next move would be.

But, however she failed in all rules and traditions of nursings, she suited her father admirably; whether it was her light decided footsteps, her soft manipulations, or the bright sweetness of her voice,

he could not bear her long away from him; he was always rather inclined to wander and get restless when she was not by; but she never left him, except for her evening visits to Dort's Mill.

Leigh was always watching for her; sometimes he came half way to meet her, but oftener she found him sitting on the low wall by the weir, throwing in idle pebbles to beguile his impatience.

Those brief talks, far from being a refreshment to Barbara, were often the saddest part of her day. Leigh bore his trouble irritably, he grew fretful and morose. Barbara found her influence waning—nothing she said seemed to comfort him, perhaps her hard treatment of Ruth had something to do with this; in his heart Leigh yearned over their perfect reconciliation, for Bab was more to him than she or even he suspected.

Leigh had taken up his quarters at the mill now—it was thought on all sides that it was better so; but he spent most of his time at Briarsley; he had made a clean breast to Sir William Travers, much to that gentleman's embarrassment.

"There must be an end to your tutorship to Ralf, I suppose," he had said to him. "Anyhow, you can't manage to keep a wife on seventy pounds a-year; it is an act worthy of Bedlam, Leigh Heathcote; are you sure you were in your right mind. But there, we must say nothing more about it till Dr.

Heathcote is better; if this gets about though it may injure your father's profession; but I don't know, he could hold his own I should think."

"I shall have to go away, I can see that clearly, Barbara," he said one evening. Poor Leigh, he was beginning to be discontented with his husks already.

"Yes, you will have to go away," sighed Bab.

"I'm beginning to see that, too; it will injure Daddie, I'm afraid, among such people as the Deanes and Ruperts, for example, especially since that horrible new doctor—what's his name—has come to Durnford. You see it won't sound well that his son has taken a wife from Dort's Mill, a village schoolmistress, too; there is no pride like county pride, I believe. Norman says it might not matter so much in London, but it does here. Norman talks of going away, do you know that, Barbara."

"Oh Leigh!" How she started.

"I heard that from Sir William; it all comes from that interloper Murray, I believe; they've been keeping it quiet, but they say he's got a strong party in his favour already, and that Lady Strath is the head of it; everyone knows she hates Norman like poison."

"But Daddie has been here all his life—no, it is impossible!" burst from Barbara's indignant lips.

"Well, I don't know. They say Murray has all the new-fangled notions, such as Norman is always talking about; young doctors have such advantage

over the old ones now. I have heard Daddie say, more than once, that he ought to go to school again to unlearn some of his notions."

"But Norman—what about Norman?" interrupted Barbara.

"Why, just as I have said. He told Sir William that there was no longer space for two such men as he and Daddie, and that if Daddie ever got into business again, he should recommend him taking a younger man as assistant, and that he thought he ought to find a fairer field for himself elsewhere, though, of course, such a plan would entail difficulties, and he would have to begin all over again; but still he spoke very cheerfully, Sir William said, and as though he were confident of his own resources. Do you think he has saved money, Barbara?"

"I don't know; there are those shares in the Spanish mine, you know; but Leigh, this is only talk—it may never happen."

"No, it may never happen; never, at least, unless Daddie gets as strong and well as ever."

"No, of course; how you frightened me," and Barbara drew a deep breath of relief.

And then they talked of other matters. Barbara wanted to know how Paul and Naomi had taken the news, but Leigh was reticent; Paul had been very angry, he said, but Naomi had talked him over—she was a good woman was Naomi. But it was evident,

from his reluctance to speak, that Leigh was rather shy of his new connections, and held himself somewhat aloof from them, and that his stay at the mill had its drawbacks as well as its charms; seeing which Barbara ceased to press him on the subject, and kept her own counsel, as she was beginning to do in most things. But the conversation left an oppression on her. She was full of trouble already, but could anything so dreadful befal her as that Norman should leave her? here was a fresh complication, an unheard-of sorrow: no, she would not face it, she would banish it resolutely from her mind—her own, her dearest friend, no, it could never happen; one of these days she would be brave, and ask him quietly about it all, and beg him not to leave them—one of these days, oh Barbara!

She reasoned herself into calmness again. She was always reasoning now, hushing herself to sleep, as it were, like a sick baby, and then she went back into her father's room. He was watching for her as usual, and a little restless; his eyes had a wistful look. Bab had noticed it before; she went up to him at once. There was no one in the room but they two. Bab leaned over him, stroking his cheek in her fond way.

"He is so sorry, Daddie, so very, very sorry; he will not let me comfort him."

She ought not to have said it, perhaps, but Leigh's

downcast face haunted her. Dr. Heathcote fixed his sad eyes on her, but did not answer; by-and-by he turned away a little, and lay quiet. But the next night when Barbara came in, there was the same look again; this time, however, she would not take any notice of it, but as soon as Hester had left the room, he beckoned to her.

"Well, Barbara?" The impatient, fretful tone was too much for her resolution.

"He sent his dear love to you, Daddie," she whispered, and then Hester came back.

But as he was bidding her good-night, and she was stooping over him to kiss him, he brought his lips close to her ear; "You must bring him to-morrow, Barbara; mind you bring him to-morrow." And he would not seem satisfied till she had nodded an assent.

That nod scorched her soul as a lie would; she was getting dreadfully scrupulous on such points now; she knew it would be a great many to-morrows before she brought him, and so it was.

But the to-morrow came at last—what a solecism—still to all intents and purposes it came, when Leigh stood beside his father's bedside.

Truth is stranger than fiction is a very hackneyed phrase, let me substitute another—truth is more beautiful than fiction. I am driven to give utterance to this thought, now I feel a scene is expected of me.

Ah me, in what lies the pathos of such scenes, I mean the real pathos in life? are there glowing colors there, or mere flesh tints? long drawn sentences, or only broken words, sighs, sacred silences more eloquent than speech? In the multitude of words there is foolishness, and in the story of the Prodigal Son itself, that story which stands out alone in parabolic beauty, conspicuous among the other lessons of the Great Master, even there the prodigal used but few words in his petition; grief is most eloquent in silence, love reveals itself in looks.

Alas! here is a scene that I cannot describe. I confess to you words fail me; it is too real; can we not each supply the missing coloring, can we not fill in what is wanting? All too sad, too vivid, is this poor prodigal of ours standing by his father's bed, with the blanched, terrified look on his young face, holding tight by the hand that has been stretched out to him, and vainly striving for some word that might help him in his need.

He cannot speak for that odd choke in his voice, neither will his manhood help him; but Dr. Heathcote does in sweet solemn speech, which scares him; the mind, a little enfeebled it may be, yet brightening slowly to its old clearness, clings to that grand old story, and makes use of sacred words to express his feelings, his hand holding his boy's tenderly all the while. "And when he was yet a great way off, his

father saw him, and had compassion, and ran and fell on his neck and kissed him."

"Father, I, too, have sinned!"

"I know it, Leigh, I know it; but be comforted."

"I shall never forgive myself—never, father."

"No; but I have forgiven you, my son."

Poor Leigh! those tender words broke him down utterly. He stretched himself across the bed—as he had done on the straw—and he and his manhood had a hard tussle for it. He was eating bitter herbs of penitence, indeed.

"My boy, my own boy, be comforted."

"I have half killed you, father! I am ruining you! I have undone Ruth and myself! What will become of us!"

"We shall be helped, Leigh. The back is made broad enough for the burden—never fear." He tried to smile, but an anxious, almost a weary look came into his face. "We must take no thought for the morrow; no thought for the morrow. Ah, well! God must help us, my son."

He had talked enough now, but Leigh would not leave him.

"He is our only boy, Hester," said Dr. Heathcote, rather feebly; "we must give him his own way—my only one. The rest are all girls—and more's the pity; but we must never let them know, poor children, how we longed for one boy." And he went on stroking

Leigh's hair with trembling fingers. "The boy is so clever; he can do anything—God bless him. He will make a great man."

Barbara rose in a little flurry, and almost pushed Leigh away. "You must not stay, you must not; see how you are exciting him."

"Oh, is that you, Barbara? I thought it was your mother. I was wandering a little, was I not?—There don't be frightened, Leigh, I shall be strong soon. God bless you, dear boy; you may come again to-morrow, and when I am better I will see your wife." And so he comforted him. In after years Barbara never thought of that scene without tears; and in the page of her old Bible—which always seemed to open so naturally at that sweet old story of the prodigal's return—there always lay a lock of grey hair, taken from that dear head, as it lay in its coffin; when kneeling by her dead father she had learned to trust and believe in her Heavenly One, and she was a happier and a wiser Barbara than she had been in the bright promise of her youth. Grey hair, and withered flowers—ah me! ah me! Leigh's visit had exhausted Dr. Heathcote terribly; still, in the end, it was productive of good. From that day he began steadily to mend. In a little while—much sooner than they had dared to hope—he began to creep about feebly in the sunny garden or lane, with Barbara's arm to support him.

It was always Barbara.

In the days of his health it was Hester on whom he leaned, and with whom he took counsel; now it was Barbara. Perhaps it was their mutual love for Leigh that had drawn them together, or the quaint brightness which was life and health to the sick man; but, however it came about, there they were, always together, the doctor and his little daughter, with often Norman Strath to make a third—and, still more often, Leigh.

I think Barbara had found her work, at last. She used to take her painting out on the lawn, and sit by him for hours, beguiling him with her merry talk. Sometimes she read to him; she would turn over page after page with untiring patience, while her thoughts travelled off into the dark future—Leigh's future, her own. Dr. Heathcote would doze off presently, and then her head would drop on her knee, and she would have a long sad talk with herself, sitting there in the sunshine. But, however weary, however foreboding she might feel, she was always ready to greet her father with a smile when he woke, and she would take up the story at the part where she left off, and read on again in her cheerful voice, until he bade her stop.

Ah! who would say that there were no under-currents overlooked in Bab's nature? Under-currents of sweetness, and thought, and pure unselfish love,

that shall make us think more highly of her than we have done yet. Ah, trust me, my Bab is a noble woman, and we shall find it out before we have done. They were sitting together one bright September day —you see, the months are not many since we began our story; it was only spring then, now it is autumn —they were sitting together in the little arbor under the great elm-tree, when Barbara suddenly put down her book.

"There is Leigh coming, Daddie," she said, trying to speak quietly; "and he has Ruth with him."

Dr. Heathcote's hands trembled a little as he stooped for his stick—for his weakness was still great.

"Give me your arm, Barbara; we must go and meet them."

"Why, Daddie? they see us; they are coming this way."

"Give me your arm," he repeated, getting on his feet with difficulty; "we must meet her half way, for my boy's sake; I wish everyone in this house to remember that she is my son's wife," and then he crept slowly down the lawn, leaning heavily on Bab's shoulder. Surely a more Christian gentleman never lived than Dr. Heathcote.

He had never seen Ruth, except in the distance, in the children's gallery. He had no idea what manner of woman she was; but Ruth knew him.

"There is your father coming to meet us," she

said, pointing with her hand. And Leigh, with an exclamation of wonder, hastened his steps and left her. It was so like Leigh—so like quick, impulsive Leigh.

"Why, father," he cried, offering him his strong young arm; "you are never coming all this way to meet us!"

"I was trying, Leigh," replied Dr. Heathcote, with a faint smile; "but where is Ruth—where is your wife, my son? You should not have left her." Leigh looked a little abashed.

"Never forget the respect you owe her—that you owe any woman." And then Ruth drew near.

"My dear, you are very welcome," said the doctor, holding out his kind hand. "Barbara, this is Leigh's wife, remember."

Such a color as flushed Ruth's pale face; her eyes filled with tears at that tender greeting; and, as the doctor's hand still held hers, she stooped for an instant and touched it reverently with her lips. But when she had so done she stood hesitating and pressing it between both her own.

"Oh, Dr. Heathcote!" she said; "can you ever forgive me this thing that I have done?" and then she hung her head, and the tears streamed from her eyes.

"My dear, there can be no question of forgiveness between you and me."

"Oh, but there can be," she replied, weeping, as though her heart would break. "I would kneel to you, if by so doing I could humble myself more than I am humbled. I have ruined your son's prospects by marrying him. I have wronged—I have injured you all. You must not forgive me yet, or speak to me as you have done—as you have done just now, Dr. Heathcote."

"My child," he returned, with that sweet dignity which had always belonged to him, "if you desire my forgiveness, who am a stranger to you, and Leigh's father, it is yours, freely. A man who has lain face to face with death, as I have, cannot feel bitterly to anyone. There must be peace amongst us, my children, during the little time I am with you." And as she still wept before him, with averted face, he put his hand on her fair hair, almost as though he were blessing her.

"Ruth," he said, "you must be another daughter to me now," and then very winningly, "will Leigh's wife give me her arm?"

Barbara turned away, and was seen no more for a long time, and Dr. Heathcote crept slowly back, leaning on his new daughter-in-law; by-and-by, when Hester came to see what had become of her father, she saw him sitting between them; Ruth in her white dress, her simple cottage-bonnet on the grass beside her, and the afternoon sun shining down on her bright uncovered hair. She and Leigh had been showing

him all their hearts, and as he looked from one to the other, from his boy to Ruth, with her sweet earnest face, he was fain to confess that it had gone hard with Leigh, that his temptation was great, and that had she been of gentle blood, she could not have borne herself with better dignity or with such sober and unconscious grace. "She will do," thought the doctor; "she will be the making of Leigh."

And even Hester, coming up with reluctant haughtiness, was driven to acknowledge that her beauty was wonderful, and her voice softened a little from its harshness as she greeted them.

"You must take Leigh's wife into the house, Hester," said Dr. Heathcote, quite cheerfully,—he called her for a long time Leigh's wife—"she will take tea with us. Barbara, where's Barbara?" and he looked round for his little daughter anxiously.

"She is in the house, father. I will send her to you. Mrs. Heathcote, will you come with me?" She spoke coldly and with difficulty. Poor Ruth flushed redly over her new name, as she rose and followed Hester down the lawn. Two grander women could hardly be seen together on a summer's day. Ruth was a little larger, a little fairer; her beauty softer perhaps, but they might have passed as sisters.

Ruth's troubles were not quite over. Hester showed her into the room which St. Ronans had occupied, and

after a meaningless sentence or two, left her. Much courtesy was not due to Leigh's wife.

Ruth was alone, and now she felt a little forlorn. She stood timidly before the glass, setting her lace ruffles and refastening the simple brooch Leigh had given her—his wedding present—and then arranging the folds of her muslin gown, with a nervous feeling that all must be scrupulously neat; her hair did not please her, she was shaking out the braids more loosely to resemble Miss Heathcote's, and wondering whether she might pick some of that lovely jessamine as a further ornament, when the door opened and Barbara came in.

Poor Barbara, her face was crimson, and her cheeks still wet with recent tears, but she came up steadily.

Ruth recoiled a little; a lock of hair escaped from her hand and strayed down her neck, like a golden brown curl; she looked lovely.

"Miss Heathcote, how you startled me."

"Did I? I did not mean to open the door so softly. Look here, Ruth, I want to speak to you."

"Do you, Miss Heathcote?

"You must not call me Miss Heathcote. I am Barbara, the world calls us sisters you know."

"The world does," returned Ruth, rather bitterly.

"Yes, and we acknowledge it also; did he not say just now, poor darling, that there must be peace amongst us? Yes, there shall be peace, Ruth."

"Between me and you do you mean?" asked Ruth, hardly able to believe her ears.

"Yes, between you and me. I will tell you the truth; I have used you hardly, Ruth. I have been cruel and unjust. I forgave Leigh, but I could not forgive you."

"I deserved it," murmured Ruth, inaudibly.

"No; not more than he did. I see it now; I said you were the woman, and should know better—so you should; but I never allowed that you were sorely tempted, also. I was angry and jealous. I could not bear that any woman should care for Leigh; he was all my own once, you know, till he went away and deceived me."

"He loves you dearly enough now; aye, dearly, dearly."

"I am glad to think it," returned Barbara gravely; but to no one, least of all to his wife, could she speak of her pain. "Well, only make him a good wife, and help him to do right, and I shall be grateful to you." But her look and tone were still a little cold, and the cloud returned to Ruth's face.

"Is this all that is to be between us," she pleaded; "only peace, Barbara?" Barbara hesitated.

"Am I never to be your friend again, because I have once deceived you? Leigh has been forgiven with a full forgiveness; is there none such for me?"

Barbara's face worked; she gave no answer, but her heart was softening perceptibly over all this beauty—this supplication.

"Our Divine friend wipes out *all* our debt, and makes it a blank before us. Why can't earthly friends forgive like that?"

"I forgive you, Ruth."

"Yes; but can you forgive truly? Will you forget the past, and let it be all like clean paper before us—a white clean surface to write our future on? Can you forgive me like that?"

And Barbara answered, humbly, "I will try; for Leigh's sake, and for your own, I will try, Ruth; only let there be peace amongst us." And then she put up her face and kissed her with a grave, lingering kiss.

And Barbara kept her word.

CHAPTER XII.

NIGEL.

"Enshrined above all precious things
My heart has set thee in its core;
Its richest treasure evermore,
And freest love about thee clings.
In life, in death, whate'er betide,
I could not now that gift recal,
Dear love, for I have given thee all."

* * * *

Helen Marion Burnside.

After a storm comes a calm is an axiom as self-evident in life as it is in natural philosophy—or in the governing principles of the material world.

Yes; but what sort of calm?

The calm of quiescence and rest? or merely the dead calm of a waiting, listening pause—when one ponders and communes with oneself as to what may next happen? or lastly, the blank rest of the worn-out soul, whom nothing can affright more—oh, saddest of all calms that.

But then as to that pause. I wish I could describe the strangeness the listening feel; it is as though

in our own inner silence—"that chamber," you know, "where we are bidden to commune with ourselves and be still"—in that great solitude we literally hear the slow surging of the next wave which is to break upon us and carry us a little higher, a little lower, it may be, but always nearer to what? The end.

It comes, but it does not surprise us; we were waiting for it you see; it drowns us in sleep; its coldness numbs us; it bruises us a little; we are stranded high and dry; "drawn out of many waters;" aye, truly, bitter waters; but what recks it, so that our feet are planted on that rock at last?

I am speaking of the secret, and it may be the supernatural instincts of the soul. Happy those to whom this listening pause does not come, they will not understand me; not all the sons and daughters of our humanity are gifted with this finer sense and attribute of being; there are many who, merged in business or pleasure, never know what it is to lose themselves in their own solitudes, to stand alone, and face to face with their own identity—why it would scare them like a ghost. Who am I? and what am I, shut up in this corporeal body? this body which, as a divine has expressed in some such words, has nothing to do with my soul, and yet which is so firmly wedded to it, "that the thought of

a divorce from it fills me with terror." "What God hath joined together let no man put asunder;" a terrible thought that for the suicide! Such questions as these would never present themselves at all to the material mind—these sacred horrors—these shudderings of a too conscious soul—I use the word in all thoughtfulness—are utterly unknown to them to whom the open vision of life is all-sufficient.

But why need I philosophise? Why? because just such a pause as this had come to Barbara; not that she had reasoned it out with herself or knew for one instant that she was on the landing-place, or perhaps, as we might more truly say, in the ante-room of some new misery; she was quite unconscious of the strange complication of circumstances that awaited her; still she had a queer habit of saying to herself sometimes, "I wonder what will happen to me to-day?" and she would go on wondering in a vague expectant way till evening. But it was always for sad things now.

And nothing would have surprised her!

So we all say, but we get oddly startled sometimes all the same, as Barbara was, when she received a letter from St. Ronans one morning, telling her that he had been ill, very ill; and thereupon followed a list of ailments, which were sufficient to make that poor little hard-worked heart of hers

ache dreadfully, so underlined and conspicuously mournful did they appear.

It was so reproachful, too; why had she never been near him all this time? her neglect and indifference were too apparent; even Nest noticed it. Why had she avoided him so the last time they had met, and never allowed him to sympathise with her in her trouble? she was treating him as a stranger, and so on. The irritability and peremptoriness of the whole letter made Barbara smile, but she thought it very sad too; "if she had a spark of feeling left for her old master," it went on—master strongly scored under—"would she come and see him this morning? he would be waiting for her in the studio," and he ended by assuring her that in spite of their many misunderstandings, he should always remain her "loving friend, Nigel."

Barbara flushed a little over that signature; he had always before signed himself St. Ronans, or Bab's master; but Nigel—Barbara put it away hurriedly, and went down to her father.

"Daddie, do you know St. Ronans has been ill?"

"Why, no, Barbara, we have not heard it from Norman, have we?"

"That's just it," returned Barbara, with a puzzled look; "we should have been sure to have heard it from him if it had been anything serious. I can't make that out, Daddie."

"No, no more can I, unless, perhaps, Lady Strath sent for Murray."

"If I thought that!" exclaimed Barbara, fiercely; "but no, it is unfair to condemn people on supposition; I will never believe it."

"Come, that's generous," returned her father.

"Well, I don't know, I can't help believing in St. Ronans; with all his faults he is so thoroughly true. I have just had a letter from him, he seems dreadfully down, poor fellow, and more than half inclined to quarrel with me for neglecting him; he says he has been ill, very ill. Do you think you can spare me this afternoon, Daddie?"

The doctor eyed her fondly.

"I don't think I shall ever have the heart to spare you again, my Barbara."

"Very well, then, I won't go. He will be very angry with me I am afraid, but never mind."

"Never mind what? why you don't believe I'm serious, Bab? They say sick people are always selfish, but somehow I hope I never shall be that."

"And you can spare me, Daddie?" She had been greatly disappointed in spite of her brave looks, for her heart was yearning over her friend.

"Of course I can; what a vain little woman it is. There, run away and make yourself as smart as you can, for your old father to admire you."

"Oh, there's no such hurry," said Bab, gleefully;

"you are not going to miss your morning's reading for all the St. Ronans in the world," and she drew a slip of paper to her, and wrote in her bold decided hand,—

"I AM sorry to hear you have been ill. I will come to you this afternoon.

"BARBARA."

And sent it off in her abrupt way on that instant. But she could not keep her attention on her reading at all, she worked on at it laboriously, but it seemed the longest morning she had ever spent. A queer expectant feeling was on her—a sort of presentiment, but for her life she could not have told you what she feared; it was quite a relief when she was ready dressed and prepared to start. "I shall hear about everything from Nest," she said to herself, and she went off at a brisk trot, which brought her to the lodge gates of St. Ronans.

She went round the garden and in at one of the glass doors of the studio, as was her usual Bohemian fashion. She hoped to find Nest there, but to her disappointment St. Ronans was alone; alone, and doing nothing as far as Barbara could see.

He came forward gravely enough, and even in that first instant she could not fail to be struck

painfully with the delicacy, almost the frail look, of the whole man. There were certainly the marks of recent and severe illness about him; his face was thinner and paler, and his eyes large and brilliant—he seemed etherealised almost.

"So you have come at last, Barbara."

"Yes, I have come at last," repeated Barbara, trying to speak cheerfully; "it has seemed a long time; I know it has, but I have been full of trouble." And she hung up her bonnet and cloak in the old place and seated herself near him.

"Does trouble make you forget your friends?" he inquired rather bitterly.

"I have never thought of them so much; don't shake your head, St. Ronans, you are hurt with me I see, but why did you not let me know that you had been ill?"

"What would have been the use?" he returned in a reproachful voice; "would you have left your father to come and see me?"

"Why, I have come now," she answered, trying lightly to defend herself.

"Yes, you have come now, after an absence and silence of weeks; you have not used me well, Barbara, indeed you have not; as I told you in my letter you have treated me as a stranger and refused my sympathy, you have shut me out entirely from you and yours, and then you wonder

that I never sent for you. How could I?" and then he repeated yet more bitterly, "how could I, till I was obliged?"

"Till you were obliged, St. Ronans?"

"Yes, till I could bear myself no longer. What I have suffered! I was sick for the sight of you, Barbara; I thought at first that I would not add to your trouble. I allowed my mother to send for Murray, for fear Norman should tell you; what a fool I was for my pains, as though you would have cared"—this in a tone of exceeding pain.

"How can you wrong me so cruelly, St. Ronans?" and tears started to Barbara's eyes.

"Do I wrong you?" he said more gently, "that is the first word of comfort I have had yet; perhaps I am a little hard upon you after all; you have been sorely tried, you are altered somehow, Barbara, you do not look well."

"How can I?" she returned in a choked voice. She felt she had already as much as she could bear without his reproaches.

"No, you have had a sad time, all of you, but your father is better now; I have been thinking of you day and night, most tenderly, you must believe it Barbara. That mad brother of yours—" Bab's eyes looked dangerous, there were no tears in them now.

"We will leave that subject if you please, St. Ronans."

"And why?" he remonstrated; "did I not say you treated me as a stranger, and so coldly, too? Why should we not discuss what has already happened?"

"Because I forbid it," she returned with unusual haughtiness,—and then she relented at the sight of his pale face. "Dear St. Ronans, you have said well, that I have been sorely tried. Leave these painful things alone; if Leigh has done wrong, we have all forgiven him, our dear angel has set us that example," and, with some hesitation, "and we have forgiven Ruth too."

The Strath lip curled a little proudly at this.

"Few fathers would have pardoned such a *mésalliance*."

"Few, perhaps; but he is one of a thousand, and God bless him!" cried Bab. "There, if you will not change the subject, I must go, for I will not discuss it with you, and I have not seen Nest."

"Nest is in London," returned Nigel sullenly; "she is buying her trousseau, and my mother is with her too; they will not be home till late."

"In London?" said Barbara in a disappointed tone. She felt caught in a trap rather; she had no intention of an indefinitely prolonged *tête-à-tête*

with St. Ronans; she had grown rather shy of him lately. Nigel caught the tone in a moment.

"You did not mean your visit for me then?" and as she colored visibly, "Why, Barbara, you are never growing prudish? I wrote that letter because I wanted you all to myself, as I had something particular to say to you, and I knew it was no good my coming over to your house, as I could not get you alone; why ever are you looking like a caged thing, Barbaretta? this is not the first time we have been shut up together."

"No, but that was because of the painting lesson," returned Barbara. It was rather a lame excuse; but she had but one clear and definite thought, that her old acquaintance St. Ronans was decidedly odd, and that she wanted to escape; her embarrassment seemed to delight St. Ronans, the cloud passed from his brow, he looked triumphant.

"Well, I am going to give you a lesson now," he replied, with a mischievous glance at her flushed face. "You know that Italian verb you refused to conjugate before." Barbara sprung from her seat.

"Let me go, St. Ronans. I tell you my father wants me, and I cannot stay any longer to-day. I will go—I say—" But Nigel had planted himself resolutely before her, and she was afraid of his detaining hand.

"Sit down, Barbara, I will not have you leave me like this; there, we will not jest any more, but your frightened face tempted me. Whatever I have to say now shall be serious; I promise you that."

"And you will not talk nonsense, St. Ronans?"

"No; I will not talk nonsense, it shall be all sober earnest between you and me; there, Barbara," holding out his hand, and going very near her. "That is the hand of one who loves you, will you be my wife?" She would have sprung from her seat again, but he firmly, very firmly, put her back, he had hold of her hand now, and kept it tightly. Poor Bab! she looked up at him with great startled eyes, but she could not face his look; then indeed she turned a little pale.

"I tell you, I love you, Barbara."

"I am sorry for it, St. Ronans."

"You are just the dearest in all the world to me, mine, my own Barbara."

"Not yours, thank God!" but her voice was inaudible; he stooped down, but he could not catch her words.

"What did you say, dear? I could not hear it; try to speak, if it be only one word, Barbara."

"I will not speak, St. Ronans."

"Will not, Barbara?"

"No; not while you hold my hand like that—oh, how you are hurting me," and as he reluctantly

freed her, she gave him a quick scared glance to see if he were in earnest.

"You will break my heart if you look at me like that," he said, watching her.

"I cannot help it, I am very miserable. We are both miserable, I believe—if you would only say that you did not mean it."

"I cannot say what is not true, Barbara."

"Ah, then indeed we are most miserable; why could you not have been satisfied with having me for your friend? Bab was so proud of her master. There cannot be this thing between you and me."

"You cannot be my wife?"

"No, I cannot," she returned, crimsoning like a rose.

"And why not, my beloved?"

She started angrily at that.

"You shall not call me that—you shall not. How dare you?" and she hid her face in her hands, and rocked herself to and fro. How was she ever to escape from him? He sat down beside her, and was silent for a little while, putting his hand to his heart as though in pain. The unnatural quiet disturbed Barbara; she looked up, pushing her hair from her face in her restless fashion; she could not bear the thought that he was watching her.

"Is this your answer, Barbara?" He spoke calmly, but his lips were blue.

"Yes—no, I have not answered you properly, have I, St. Ronans? What ought I to say? I am so stunned."

His face brightened all over.

"Say—I will try to love you, Nigel!"

"No, no—you are St. Ronans; I will never call you that, and I do love you dearly, only, not as you wish me."

"But you would in a little time, Barbara; think what you are to me, and try."

"It would be no use trying," she answered sadly, "I know my own feelings for you too well. I am very sorry, sorry for myself, as well as you; if I knew how to thank you I would; but you must let me leave you now." She spoke very gently, but he started up quite fiercely at that; she had refused him—refused him, Nigel Strath—no, it was impossible.

Anyone else would have said it was impossible to thus look at them—the man with his beautiful face carrying himself so proudly and well, speaking like a young prince; and the doctor's little daughter, with her quaint face and ways, pushing her hair into rough ripples, and answering him in her quick decided voice, sorely troubled indeed, but no longer abashed.

"You shall not go; Barbara, do you know you are killing me? Wait a moment;" and he had to hold

himself still in that strange quietness, before he could go on.

"Why do you excite yourself like this?" said Barbara, now really frightened. "I am not killing you, it is cruel to tell me that; how can I help giving you this pain?"

He did not answer, and she leant over him and touched him.

"St. Ronans." He turned from her angrily.

"I will not answer to that name. I am Nigel."

"No, no, not to me," she implored, feeling how much it involved; "let me keep to the old name, it is very dear to me."

"Well, what do you want with me?" he asked, fixing his brilliant eyes on her; their hungry despairing look filled Barbara with sick pain, but she answered quietly.

"I want you to forgive me; it is not my fault that you are so unhappy, is it—tell Barbara you are not angry with her, and let her go."

"Yes, you may go," he repeated in a strange tone. "But you will be here again soon, I feel it, I know it; you are making me suffer tortures, but you will not escape me. I tell you I will move heaven and earth to win you, and I will win you yet, Barbara."

"Good-bye," she answered sadly and turned away; and he called out after her in a loud

voice. "Good-bye, my Barbara," and then she went.

Poor Barbara! another rock was shivered before her eyes; as she walked home through the sweet autumn lanes she hardly knew where her feet were carrying her, she felt so stunned and dizzy. If this were life, what a terrible thing life was after all, how full of trouble and sadness. Here she had given pain to the man whom she loved as a brother, she had gone near to break his heart—what a cruel alternative had been hers; and the bitter tears rushed into Barbara's eyes. She could have sobbed aloud, so much did she shrink from the thing that she had done.

It was all over with Bab's master; as she recalled the softness and tenderness of his speech, the dumb pleading of his eyes, she was almost beside herself with wonder. That he should love her at all was strange, but that he should love her with such passion, was a thing incredible. "Why should he? what am I that he should care for me like this?" cried the poor child; and her heart was heavy with reflected sadness.

She was not expected home for hours; she stole through the shrubberies, and by a back way into the house, and crept silently into her den, and hid herself like a wounded thing, but not all for sorrow; oh no, a wondrous light—can you guess what it was?—was

breaking over Barbara. She stood startled and awe-struck on the brink of a new revelation. She had been very near it once or twice, but Nigel's words had woke her to full consciousness. Do you know how a touch will kindle a spark into a flame? It may have been long smouldering; all at once it will ignite; so it was with Barbara. She had scarcely known at first what this strong repugnance to Nigel's offer had meant, or why she had shrunk so angrily from his tenderness. And then all at once it broke on her, and she had risen up trembling and in haste to be gone — gone with her newly discovered treasure.

Ah! what if Nigel could see her now, sitting in the twilight, her face crimson, her eyes still wet with the tears she had shed; already she had forgotten his loving words; what were their sweetness compared to those she was repeating over and over to herself, mouthing them softly in the darkness, "Be faithful to me, Barbara — little Barbara, be faithful to me."

Ah! is it so? Has the glamor fallen from your eyes? Do you know it at last, Barbara?

Yes, she knew it at last; she recognised who was her lord and master—her dear, her dearest friend, now. She repeated his name softly, and started and blushed over it; she knew all her sweet wholesome love was his, and his alone. "I am faithful

to you, Norman," she whispered, "my poor, poor, St. Ronans," and her arms fell to her side as she went into a long dream.

By-and-by she heard his voice in the hall below, and her heart beat and throbbed to suffocation. A week ago, yesterday even, she would have flown down three steps at a time to meet him; now she stood rooted to the spot, and spell-bound. How could she ever go to him, ever speak to him again, she wondered; why, he would read the secret of her new bashfulness at once, aye, truly he would, with the quick instinct of love, and all that sad future would never have got itself written, Barbara.

Why are there no invisible forces to impel us to our happiest destiny? Why is it that "it might have been," is written upon so many lives that have just missed their right turning? Why, indeed; I am speaking psychologically, and looking on the natural sequence of events with human eyes. But the true history of many a lost life will never really be known till the books are opened hereafter; and then shall we see the clear guidance that led them through such devious wanderings, and how, through all the weariness and blindness of the road, a voice behind them has seemed to say, "this is the way, walk ye in it," and what matter, however toilsome and hard, if it lead them to the "many mansions" at last.

Barbara, shrinking and trembling in the twilight, hears Norman's voice, as he closes the door with a clang, and creeps to the window to look after him.

"What a terrible thing life was after all," she had said a few hours ago, when the remembrance of Nigel's misery was fresh upon her, and she had wept such bitter tears of pity and self-reproach. Would she say that now? I don't think we need blame Barbara for this sudden revulsion of feeling, for the quick kindling of a light that nearly blinded her, even though it were at the expense of another's happiness. Her heart would be heavy for many a long day, for Nigel's sake; even now the first bloom and sweetness of her love was gone. But still she would not have been human, not Barbara, if for the time being, intense feelings of thankfulness, nearly akin to joy, did not predominate when she first woke to the full knowledge that she loved as she would be loved.

END OF VOL. II.

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